

PLAY MAKER

Westminster Press books by

DICK FRIENDLICH

Pivot Man

Warrior Forward

Goal Line Stand

Line Smasher

Play Maker



PLAY MAKER

by

DICK FRIENDLICH

Philadelphia

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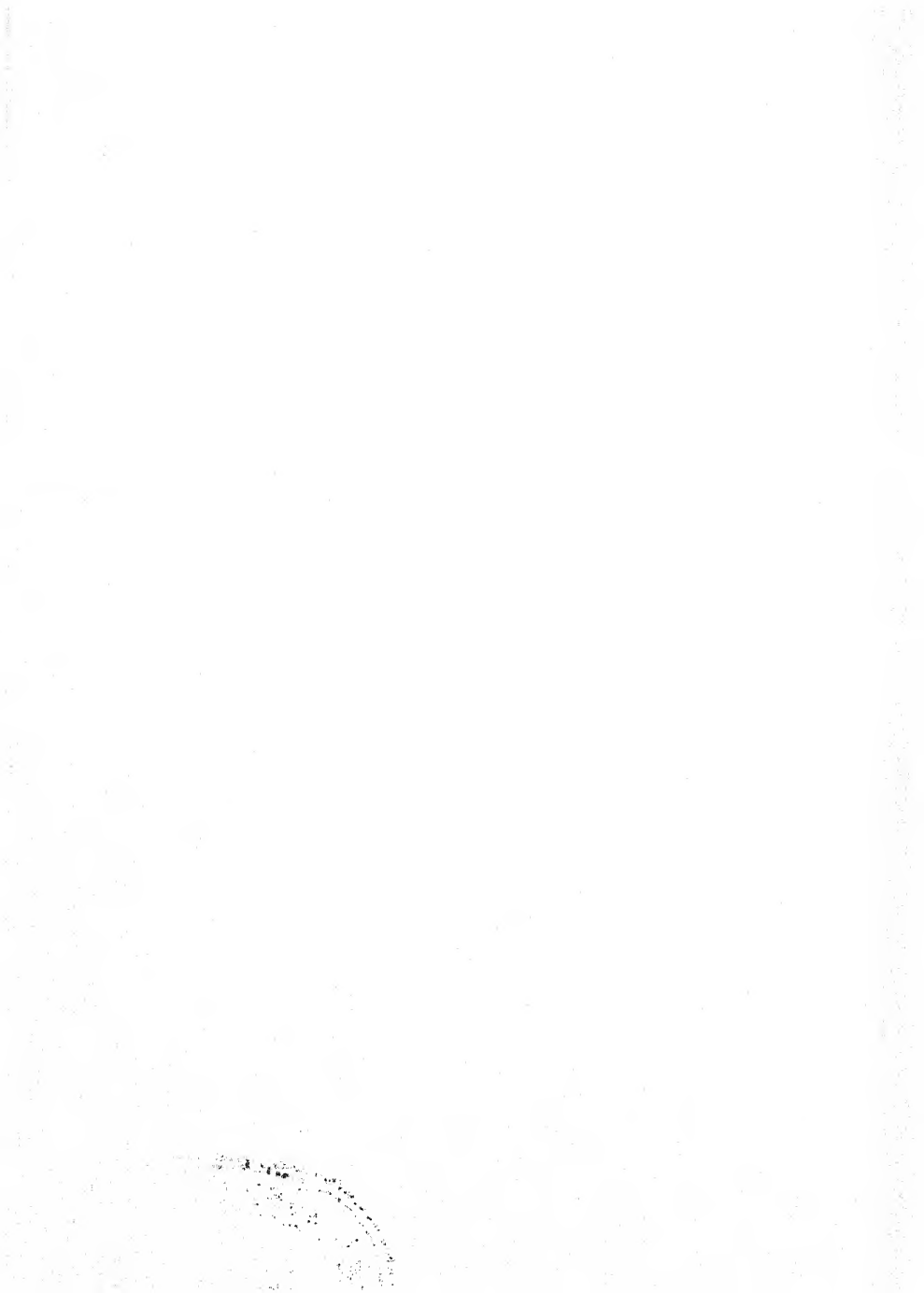
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*To Morie Morrison,
who is responsible for everything*

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I

Keith Opens His Mouth

GRIND 'EM up and throw 'em to the hogs, mates! Give 'em nothing!" The voice of Leo Nyland, Calvert's line backer, cut through the noise coming down from the stands. It was a triumphant challenge, ringing with the assurance of a winner.

Keith Elliott wiped the sleeve of his blue jersey across his sweat-streaked face and grinned as he shifted his big frame a foot more to the outside of the weary Superior end. All day long the Calvert Wolf Pack had been grinding up the foe and hurling him back. Now, as the late afternoon shadows gradually lengthened on the green turf, the scoreboard read: "Calvert 27, Superior 0." It would be all over in a few minutes.

The end came up off his heels and set himself for the charge. Keith tensed. At the snap of the ball, he saw the end feint a block in his direction, then charge past him.

Cutback, he thought as he moved across the line. The runner was coming on his side, a blocker in front of him and another swinging out of the line to take him from the side. Superior had been trying Keith's tackle frequently with that same play, without notable success.



Superior had no more luck this time. Keith swung his leg around and the lineman coming at him for the trap block did not make a fair contact. Then Keith took the leading blocker with a lunging dive and the ball carrier, with no interference left, was thrown heavily by Nyland, tearing through the gap behind Elliott.

That was the fourth-down play and Superior surrendered the ball in dispirited fashion, denied even the consolation of a single touchdown. Before the grimly satisfied Wolf Pack could assemble for the huddle, the entire Calvert bench seemed to boil out on the field. A complete new team came in to play out the last few minutes. Keith and the other regulars jogged off to be greeted by the roaring cheers from the massed Calvert rooting section.

It ended very quickly. At once the gridiron was flooded by the happy rooters who came shouting and milling down from the stands. There were handshakes and congratulations for the winners, handshakes and condolences for the losers, admirers who wanted their programs autographed — all the triumphant trimmings that went with victory.

Side by side, Keith and Leo Nyland gradually edged their way out of the crowd and walked slowly toward the tunnel which led under the stands to the Calvert dressing room.

Leo heaved a sigh in which weariness and contentment blended.

“ Well, that’s the last one, isn’t it? ”

Keith nodded, smiling a little. Above his skinned nose, his friendly gray eyes clouded with regret. He

knew how Nyland felt. Happy, and a trifle sad. They were seniors who had played their last football game for the Silver and Blue. For an instant, he wished that it were the beginning, not the end. But only for an instant.

"Yep. We're through, Lion Man. Has-beens. Washed up."

Nyland — known as Leo the Lion to his friends — glanced up at his companion. He was three inches shorter than the rangy, big-boned tackle, dark-haired and dark-complexioned where Keith was sandy-haired and fair; round-faced while the other was sharp and angular. He looked more like a bear than a lion. A good-natured, playful bear, and just about as powerful.

"A sort of a jolt, when you think about it," he conceded, then added cheerfully: "What the heck! It's been fun. At least we played on a winner. Never lost to Superior. That'll give the new kids a record to shoot at."

That was the most satisfying part of it, Keith thought. He and the others who had come in as freshmen four years before could always be proud of that achievement. They were the football team that Superior could not beat.

They reached the entrance to the tunnel and Keith stopped to take one last quick look around the big concrete stadium. Behind them the noisy knots of rooters were beginning to dissolve, and against the darkening sky the empty stands looked bleak and cold.

"Yah, you big apes! Just wait, just wait!"

Startled, Keith and Leo looked up. Standing on the row of seats overlooking the tunnel was a small, slight figure, wearing the gold-trimmed black cap of a

Superior rooter. He was shaking his fist at them defiantly, and he was unmistakably mad.

"Wait for what, sonny?" Nyland asked with a grin.

The "sonny" seemed to infuriate the lad almost beyond endurance.

"Wait till we get you in basketball!" he screamed, nearly in tears. "We'll get even! We'll — we'll murder you, that's what! Just you wait!"

His anger was so all-consuming that Keith could not help laughing, at which the youngster stamped his foot, turned, and jumped down to the bottom row of the stands. Then, with another wave of his clenched fist, he vaulted over the low rail and ran swiftly across the field.

"Now there goes a hard loser," Nyland chuckled. "Lucky for us he wasn't bigger. He'd have come after us aswinging, from the sound of him."

"I'm sure you could have handled him," Keith gibed, as their cleats sounded hollowly in the tunnel. "At that, it must be kind of discouraging to come over here and get pasted regularly."

"I'll bet it is. But he'll have his chance pretty soon, and he knows it. How long since we've won a game from Superior in basketball?"

"Gosh, I really don't know. Not since we've been here, anyway. It goes back at least five or six years."

"Queer, isn't it," Leo said thoughtfully. "We beat 'em in football year in and year out, and they do the same to us in basketball. I suppose there must be a reason, but darned if I know what it is."

"Oh, there's a good reason —" Keith began, but he did not finish. Outside the entrance to the dressing

room, enthusiastic Calvert rooters set upon them both in joyful celebration, and by the time he and Leo had struggled through the well-wishers and gained the haven of the showers, Keith had forgotten the subject.

“ Sandwich? ”

Tim Robertson, editor of the Calvert student daily, the *Wolf Cry*, put the question as they paused outside Harlow's traditional gathering place for Calvert students in downtown Woodland. Keith looked inquiringly at Leo Nyland, who nodded agreement.

“ I'm faint with hunger, as they say,” Leo remarked placidly. “ By all means, leave us eat.”

He pushed open the door into the restaurant. Keith, the last one through, held it open for a tall, curly-haired youth who was just coming out. He was wearing the blue varsity sweater with the silver block C on the chest, and a silver stripe on the right sleeve testified that he had won more than a single letter.

“ Hi, Jack,” Keith said. Jack Tucker, the Calvert basketball captain, smiled his thanks as he went past.

Harlow's was crowded, but the three of them found a booth against the wall. Two girls sitting in the adjoining booth looked up briefly, then resumed their own conversation.

“ That Tucker always struck me as a nice guy,” Leo Nyland said speculatively as they sat down. “ Hope we have a decent season.”

Tim Robertson took off his glasses and polished them mechanically with his napkin. He was a lean-faced youth of medium height and build, with a darting glance, and he had been Keith's roommate for the pre-

ceding three months.

"I hope so too." Tim frowned slightly as he spoke. "Although I don't expect it."

Keith chuckled suddenly in recollection.

"Remember that little bantam rooster who challenged us in the stadium Saturday?" he asked Leo. "Told us how Superior would pulverize us?"

Nyland laughed, and as Robertson looked at them inquiringly, Keith explained.

"He's probably right," the editor said ruefully. "I will say I like this new coach, Dewey. Seemed to me we were just a little better last year than we were under Frosty Jones. Even though we did finish last in the Conference — as usual."

"Sure, it takes time." Nyland sounded hopeful. "Can't expect miracles in one season. I hear the fellows on the squad like Dewey a lot. They have more confidence in him than they had in Frosty."

"I wish I thought so." Keith shook his head. "Of course, Frosty had to step down, win or lose, because he'd reached the school's retirement age. But he was up against an impossible situation here and it isn't any different for Walt Dewey. Calvert has simply gotten used to losing in basketball, that's all. You can darn near smell it when they go out on the floor against teams like Superior, or Sequoia or Mid-State."

Robertson's blue eyes glinted in interest.

"That's an interesting theory. You really think it's psychological, instead of just luck, or coaching, or material?"

"Not altogether, of course," Keith admitted. "We've got that cracker box of a gym, to start with. It's worse

than a lot of high school gyms in this state. That's no help. As for the coaching, it's probably just about as good as the next school's. But we don't get the same break in material, and you know why? Because the good prep cagers don't pick colleges that get whacked as regularly as Calvert. A winning team is the best advertisement, no question about it."

Keith was so engrossed in his explanation, as were his two companions, that none saw the quick, sidelong glances thrown their way by the girls in the next booth.

"You make it sound as though winning were the most important thing," Robertson said, with a note of doubt. "Sorry, but I won't buy that."

Keith waved a hand in an impatient gesture.

"That's not what I mean, at all. Win some, lose some, what's the difference? Winning 'em all isn't too good, either, because you might get the idea you were awful hot stuff — too hot to handle. But what's worse is to have a team going out there convinced it's going to lose. Why, all Superior has to do is step out on the court, and our basketball team choke up."

"Choke up?" Nyland said dubiously. "You mean they quit before they start?"

Keith shrugged. "That's a harsh way to put it. But remember last year — the Redding game? We had 12 points on 'em going into the second half and then collapsed — folded up like an accordion. And how about Sequoia? and Mid-State? Same thing."

"I wouldn't call Jack Tucker a choke artist," Nyland said doggedly. "He strikes me as a scrapper."

"Oh, sure — personally, he is. But as the captain, he's leading a lost cause and it sticks out all over him."

What the team needs is the conviction that it's just as good as any other bunch, whether it really is or not."

Robertson grinned. "Why don't you convince 'em, Keith? You won your class numerals in basketball as a freshman, I remember."

"Sure I did," Keith made vigorous reply. "And I was a pretty fair guard too. You know why I've never turned out for varsity ball here? For the exact reasons I've been telling you — I didn't fancy playing with a bunch of chronic losers. Why, rusty as I am now, I could probably make first string if I turned out tomorrow. Just because I wouldn't give up before the season started, like Tucker and the rest of 'em."

"That's big talk, mister! I'd like to see you try!"

Startled, Keith swung his head around and stared into a pair of dark eyes blazing with anger. One of the girls sitting in the adjoining booth had half risen from her seat, propping her arm on the leather-covered partition which separated them.

"Try — try what?" Keith stumbled over the words in astonishment.

She gave a quick toss of her head and brushed a strand of her dark brown hair from her forehead.

"Make the first string! Be the big pillar of strength! Show everyone how to win all the games! You could do it, couldn't you? I just heard you!"

She almost hurled the phrases at him, biting them off with a flash of her white teeth. Leo Nyland breathed a soft "Wow!" as Keith crimsoned in confusion.

"Now, look, Miss —" he began unhappily, but his accuser, after one last glare of angry contempt, turned to her companion and said abruptly: "Come on,

Thelma. Let's get out of here."

The other girl, who had been listening in open-mouthed admiration, got up quickly, a smile tugging at the corners of her mouth. Without a backward glance, the two walked away toward the door, leaving Keith sitting with the stunned look of a man who had been hit over the head from an unexpected quarter.

Leo Nyland, his elbows resting on the table, covered his face with his hands, but the spasmodic movement of his shoulders was eloquent testimony to his silent laughter. Robertson fixed Keith with one long look before he abandoned all efforts at restraint and burst into uncontrollable merriment.

"I don't see that it's so funny," Keith said sourly. But Tim was gasping for breath and Leo was beginning to wipe the tears from his eyes, and he could not maintain any pretense to dignity in the face of that. Now that the surprise of the attack had worn off, Keith could appreciate how helpless he must have seemed, being ticked off in such fashion by a girl about half his size. He managed a sheepish grin.

"I didn't realize she was listening," he said guiltily. "I sure stirred up something!"

"You sure did." Tim was still laughing. "'Pillar of strength' — oh, brother!"

That set Nyland off again, and it was another full minute before either had regained sufficient composure to talk naturally.

"At that, you did sound pretty positive about what was wrong with the team," Robertson observed.

"You idiot, I didn't mean it that way," Keith said irritably. "I was only explaining the why of it, not

how to correct it. There's a big difference between a diagnosis and a cure."

"The lady didn't seem to understand the difference," Nyland put in, dabbing at his eyes. "Who was she, Keith?"

"Never saw her before in my life. You know her?"

Both his friends shook their heads and Tim added: "But she sure knows you, Keith boy. Looks to me like the beginning of a beautiful friendship."

"What a horrible thought!" Keith grimaced. "I'd rather raise pet crocodiles. This'll teach me not to talk so loud."

"I have an even better idea," Nyland beamed. "Don't talk — period."

The forward in the blue jersey held the ball shoulder high in the corner of the court and darted a swift glance up at the electric timer suspended from the roof of the gymnasium.

"Shoot, Jack, shoot!"

The plea came from all sides as the second hand moved slowly up to the vertical. Tucker feinted a pass into the center lane, then suddenly pushed the ball away in a soft one-hander that swished down through the netting just as the buzzer sounded to signify the end of the first half.

There was a spontaneous outburst of clapping from the half-filled gym. Tucker, with an embarrassed grin, joined the other Calvert players and the coach as they trailed off the court. Behind them came their opponents, the Lake City Teachers, and both teams disappeared beneath the stands.

Tim Robertson flipped a piece of popcorn into his mouth with an expert gesture.

"Look pretty good in spots, don't they?"

"Oh, sure." Keith Elliott shrugged. "Why shouldn't they? Lake City isn't much stronger than Woodland High School. Gimme some popcorn, you pig."

Robertson offered the bag.

"That Tucker is first class. And that soph center, Michaels — he moves nicely. We may surprise somebody this season."

"Maybe." Keith sounded skeptical. "I'll wait till I see 'em against tougher competition, though."

Robertson surveyed the stands.

"Looks like everybody's going to wait. Here's our first game of the season, no admission charge, and look at the place! I'll bet there aren't fifteen hundred here. What's the registration here now — six thousand?"

"Something like that." Keith munched popcorn. "Just proves what I was saying the other night. And yet the graduate manager and the athletic department and the alumni are always yammering for a new gym, with three times as many seats. What for, when they can't fill this one for free?"

"You've got me convinced," Tim conceded, sighing. "Though I never understood why they built this place so small to begin with. The football stadium's large enough, and they were both put up about the same time."

"That was twenty-five, thirty years ago. Those days basketball was just something to fill in the months between football and baseball seasons. Now it's just as important as both — except here at Calvert."

Keith suddenly lowered his voice and looked around. "I'd better not talk too loud," he said with mock apprehension. "Supposing that girl is here?"

"The one who chose you at Harlow's?" The editor grinned. "Did you ever find out who she was?"

"Nope. Nor will I try to find out. This campus is too small for the two of us, and I'm afraid I'd be the one to go."

Calvert came back in the second half to make a run-away of the game with the outclassed Teachers. Dewey used everyone on the bench and the Wolf Pack's performance was naturally ragged, with many bad passes and mistakes on defense.

Keith and Tim strolled back to Bannerman, the freshman dormitory where they shared a third-floor room as senior sponsors. As they walked down the corridor, they heard loud laughter and the sound of a scuffle from behind a closed door.

Keith moved swiftly, flung open the door without knocking. The two occupants of the room, thrashing on the floor in a friendly wrestling match which had already overturned two chairs, stopped and looked up fearfully as Keith's frame filled the doorway.

"All right, knock it off," he said crisply, but not harshly. "It's after ten o'clock. And don't forget you pay for any broken furniture."

"Yes, sir," stammered one scuffler as he scrambled erect. Keith closed the door and grinned at Robertson.

"Fool kids," he commented tolerantly. In return for the room, rent-free, he and Tim were responsible, as sponsors, for keeping order in their wing of the dormitory, as well as answering questions, giving advice, and

acquainting the newcomers with Calvert customs. Usually it did not take the freshmen long to learn their way around, and after the first month each fall the sponsors' principal duties were to keep the boys from making too much noise at night.

"Thank goodness, the water-bag season is over," Tim commented. "At least, I haven't heard any recently."

Keith grinned reminiscently as they turned into their own room. "I remember when I was a frosh," he said dreamily. "I nailed Joe Gray right on the noggin from the top floor. And when I turned around from the window, there was Harry Westfall, my sponsor, standing right in the doorway! Thirty hours chopping wood down at the infirmary — that's what I got. It took most of my Saturdays all that spring. It was the last bagful of water I ever dropped."

"I was never caught," Tim said loftily.

Keith snorted. "With those glasses, you look so virtuous. No one would suspect you were capable of any deviltry."

Robertson leered. "I have my moments."

That was Friday. Robertson was usually out of the room most of the week end, supervising the preparations for Monday's edition of the *Wolf Cry*, and Keith was not surprised when his roommate failed to turn up until late Sunday night.

"What a workout!" Tim breathed as he sank into a chair. "I'll be glad enough to knock off for Christmas vacation."

Keith looked up inquiringly from his book. "Lots of big news?"

"Oh, middling. I did most of my personal sweat-

ing over tomorrow's editorial. I expect some fireworks on it."

"Ah, the crusading editor! What are you attacking now — the price of coffee at the Co-op or the Government's foreign policy?"

Robertson cocked his head to one side and began to polish his glasses carefully.

"It's not an attack, really. A sort of statement of a problem. The basketball problem at Calvert."

Keith sat up abruptly.

"What about it?" he asked sharply.

"Exactly — what about it? You know — Why do we lose so consistently? Is the players' attitude all wrong? — that stuff. It's actually your idea, Keith."

"Great Scott, Tim!" Keith jumped up hurriedly, knocking his chair over backward. "You didn't put my name in it?"

"Of course not. What kind of lunkhead do you think I am? But it is pretty much the things we've been discussing in the last few days."

Keith rubbed a hand nervously through his sandy hair.

"That was just friends talking — you and Leo and I," he said uneasily. "I wish you'd let me know before you did anything like this. I'm not sure it's going to look so hot in print."

Robertson eyed him steadily.

"And if I had let you know?" he asked dryly. "You would have said no. Besides," he frowned slightly, "what's wrong with bringing it out into the open? You made some darned good arguments; why object to their being printed? Particularly since they'll be under my

name and not yours? ”

Keith flushed. The editor had rammed home his points shrewdly. He would have protested vigorously against an editorial, and yet, if a fellow had certain convictions and spoke out on them, he shouldn't hesitate to defend them.

“ Well, not everyone's going to like it, I bet,” he murmured lamely, and Robertson shrugged.

“ So what? If I wrote only editorials I thought everyone would agree with, I'd have to leave the column blank three days a week. If this provokes a ruckus and gets something done, then I'm satisfied.”

“ Sure, I see your point,” Keith said, but with mounting uneasiness. He knew his roommate's style of writing. He was quite certain, without reading the editorial, that a good many persons would not like it. They would not like it at all.

Leo had the right idea, he thought remorsefully. Don't talk — period.

It was too late now.

2

Keith Accepts a Challenge

LEO NYLAND spied Keith coming out of the Co-op and held up his copy of the *Wolf Cry* as though it were a bomb that might go off.

"Your idea?" he asked soberly.

Keith, pausing at the top of the shallow stone steps, scowled. He knew what Leo meant, for he had already read Tim's editorial four times, feeling worse about it with each reading.

"It certainly wasn't my idea," he snapped. "I didn't know he was going to write it."

"Well, I admire his nerve, if not his judgment. This is really going to kick up a row. I wouldn't be surprised if some of the basketballers took a notion to swat our friend."

"Yeah?" Keith's eyes hardened and his jaw set stubbornly. "If they try, they'll have another guy to swat — yours truly. Besides, it's all true, isn't it?"

Leo shot him a look. "Probably. But he might have presented it a little more delicately. Did you see the line about 'folding up like an accordion when the real shooting begins'? He's practically accusing them of being quitters."

"I know," Keith sighed in exasperation. "Sometimes Tim lets his typewriter run away with his brains. But it's too late now."

"I'll say it is. The city papers have picked it up already. It's all over the *Morning Call* — 'Editor Blasts Calvert Cagers.'"

Keith groaned.

"I suppose it's really my fault, Leo. I started him off on it that night at Harlow's. If I'd dreamed he was going to use it —" he trailed off despairingly.

"How's he feel about it now — when he sees it printed?"

"I dunno. I haven't seen him since before breakfast. Anyway, what could I say? It's exactly what I'd been spouting."

Leo nodded sympathetically. Suddenly, as he looked over Keith's shoulder, he stiffened.

"Oh, oh," he whispered. "Duck!"

"Why? Who — what's up?" Keith asked hurriedly and turned his head. In the next instant he had turned it back again and involuntarily hunched his shoulders, as though to make himself look smaller. But not in time.

The girl coming up the steps to the Co-op had caught a glimpse of his face in that fraction of a second, and her own features, rather pretty in repose, took on grim lines.

She halted as she reached the top step, her dark brown eyes frosty.

"Congratulations, *Mister Elliott*." Her voice was laden with scorn. "That was truly a brilliant editorial."

Keith straightened. He could not pretend he had not heard her. When he turned, he did pretend surprise.

"Oh, hello," he said weakly. Nyland, the coward, had sidled away. "I didn't know you knew my name, Miss — er — Miss —"

"Everyone knows Keith Elliott," she said with deceptive sweetness. "And those who don't can always hear him. My name is Stone, Catherine Stone. I think you know my cousin, Jack Tucker. I've told him of your generous offer to help the basketball team. He'll be expecting you — especially after this morning's *Wolf Cry*."

Keith gaped at her. Jack Tucker's cousin!

"Now look, Miss Stone," he began in confusion. But she continued to fix him with a look of such absolute disdain that he saw the futility of prolonging the conversation. Abruptly he strode down the stairs with what he hoped was some dignity.

Nyland was waiting for him.

"What'd she say?" he asked eagerly as he fell in step.

"Nothing!" Keith flung at him, crimson-faced, as he increased his pace. Leo's brows arched in surprise and Keith slackened his furious stride. There was no point in venting his feelings on the Lion Man.

"Sorry — she sort of caught me flat-footed. Can you imagine — she's Jack Tucker's cousin! Twelve hundred girls in this blasted university, and I have to sound off in front of her! How's that for luck?"

"Oh, no!" Nyland tried to look sympathetic, but laughter suffused him. "Oh, no!"

"Oh, yes," Keith said sourly. "I could wring that Robertson's neck! And yours too. A fine pal you are!

You ran away as though you were scared to death! ”

“ I was — as soon as I saw the look on her face,” Leo admitted promptly, still laughing. “ Besides, what did you want me to do — slug her? It was just a friendly conversation, so I thought you two would rather be alone.”

“ Thanks.” Keith sounded bitter. “ What do I do now? Spend the rest of the year ducking around corners? That wildcat is going to start in on me every time she sees me.”

“ You could quit school,” Leo suggested cheerfully.

“ It’s an idea.”

There was no escaping the subject of the editorial that day. Tim’s column had touched off an explosion of opinion, and no one seemed interested in anything else.

Keith tried to avoid being drawn into discussion, but without success. Not many were on Tim’s side, it was quite obvious.

“ That skinny twerp has his nerver!” stormed George Steele, the varsity fullback. “ He couldn’t make the badminton team himself, but here he goes trying to coach basketball! I know he’s a friend of yours, Keith, but don’t you think he’s way out of line on this? ”

“ Well — in a way — there’s something there — ” Keith made his evasive reply. “ Excuse me, George, I have to run.”

He beat a hasty retreat, and went looking for his roommate. But Tim was not to be found, either in the room or in the *Wolf Cry* offices. It was not until long after dinner that the editor came back to the dormitory to find Keith waiting with nervous impatience.

"You certainly fixed things —" Keith began.

Tim held up his hands protectively. "Not you too," he said, with evident weariness. "I don't want any more about that editorial just now, if you don't mind. Everyone, from Glenn Nixon down, has been climbing all over me. I'm sick of hearing what a no-good, stupid, pompous jackass I am. I'd rather agree than argue, right now."

Before Tim's obvious disgust, Keith relented.

"O. K.," he said grudgingly. Then he asked curiously: "Nixon? How'd he get into the act?"

Glenn Nixon was Calvert's director of athletics, a bustling little man charged with the supervision of the entire sports program.

"Well, according to Glorious Glenn," Robertson said irritably, "I have just cost the university — the athletic department, anyway — something like a quarter of a million dollars. And if you think Glorious Glenn is happy about it, you're mistaken. He ain't."

"A quarter of a million?" Keith gasped. "Oh, nonsense!"

"According to Nixon, it's not nonsense. You've heard of James Madison?"

"The fourth President of the United States? Certainly."

"Don't be humorous — not now," Tim said plaintively. "The Madison of Central Steel, class of Umptyump — that one. He's going to give Calvert a chunk of money to build a new basketball pavilion. Or he was — until today. Now he's not so sure."

"Because of your editorial?"

Tim's mouth twisted wryly, as though he found it

hard to believe himself.

"That's what Nixon said, and he was plenty pained about it. Claims Madison rang him up today and told him he was very much concerned about the story. If it was a true picture of the basketball situation here, Madison says he's not sure he wants to contribute anything toward it. Now he thinks the money might do more good if it were donated to a different cause, such as a new wing for the Law Library."

"Yipe!" A slow grin spread over Keith's face, as he pictured the little athletic director jumping up and down with rage. "Well, why not build a new library wing, instead of a gym? All the better, I say."

Tim's reply was cut off by a knock at the door — a knock so loud and demanding that Keith sent a startled glance at his roommate. From the sound of it, he guessed that the knocker was on no friendly errand. Tim cleared his throat and said, "Come in."

Jack Tucker pushed open the door and shut it behind him very carefully. He was an inch taller than Keith, slim and supple. He had rather pleasant features, but there were hard lines about his mouth now and his eyes were narrow slits. Instinctively, Keith stiffened. Here was an angry man, no mistake about it.

The captain advanced to within a few feet of Robertson, without so much as a look in Keith's direction.

"I suppose you know why I came over," he said grimly.

Tim squared his shoulders and met the other's glare with a steady gaze. "The editorial, I imagine."

Tucker, who had obviously been keeping his emotions in check with difficulty, exploded.

"You imagine!" His voice cracked with fury. "You could have said anything you wanted about me — personally, I don't care what you print in that fish wrapper. You know what you've done? You've put a swell guy like Walt Dewey on a spot he can't possibly get off, and you've wrecked any chance the team might have had before it's even started. And all for what? So you could get your name in the city papers. I hope you're pleased."

Tim's color had begun to rise during the captain's tirade and behind his glasses his eyes glinted wrathfully. But it was Keith who made the reply.

"Take it easy, Jack," he said, placatingly. "I didn't write it, but I sold Tim on the idea — he'll tell you that. It's the way I felt about the team. I can't expect you to like it. But take it out on me, not him."

"Now, wait a minute —" Robertson protested heatedly. Tucker swung around to confront Keith. "The great Elliott!" he rasped. "Has the answers to everything! Did you ever try playing on a loser?" For a moment, he was almost pleading. "Did you? It's not as easy as playing on a club with three good men for every job." Then the sneer came back in his voice. "You wouldn't try it, Elliott. You quit basketball after your frosh season. Didn't care to have any part of a game you didn't win all the time, I suppose?"

"That's not even half true," Keith said, flushing. "I didn't mind losing — it was the way we kept losing. And I preferred to concentrate on one sport."

"That's not the way I heard it." Tucker's reply was contemptuous. "I heard you could make first string right now on will power alone."

Keith winced. Dear Cousin Catherine!

"Well, save your energy," the captain went on. "If you guaranteed us twenty points a game, I wouldn't give you locker room on my team."

"Your team!" Keith flared. He had controlled his own temper in the face of Tucker's outburst, partly because he understood how Jack felt and partly because he nursed a sense of guilt. Now that restraint vanished.

"Your team! I thought Walt Dewey was the coach. I don't need your approval to turn out. You can use all the help you can get, from what I've seen."

"We can do without yours." Tucker's teeth showed in a smile devoid of mirth. "Save your energy for telling other people how to run their business."

"Don't try to grab all the credit, Keith," Robertson interposed, his voice heavy with irony, and Tucker wheeled to face him again. "I wrote it, Jack, and it's my baby, whatever the sources were. You've been stomping around here like a maniac, but you haven't denied that it's true, so why shouldn't I write about it? The *Wolf Cry's* a student paper, and the consistently lousy showing of the basketball team is a matter of student concern."

Tucker went white. For an instant, Keith feared a physical clash, but the captain suppressed his fury and said: "O. K., Robertson. I don't know what I expected to get from you, anyway." He went out swiftly.

"A sort of full day," Tim said, with a rueful laugh. "Now if only Prexy would drop in, that would make it complete. He's the only one I can think of who hasn't spoken his piece to me."

"Yeah." Keith picked up a book from his desk with

a quick, jerky movement, slammed the cover shut, turned and sat down on the bed, his forehead furrowed. Robertson eyed him speculatively.

"Sorry if I put you in the middle, chum."

"Not your fault," Keith sighed. "I wonder if Dewey would give me a suit?"

"Are you serious?"

"Have to be," Keith said unhappily. "Let's face it. I shot off my mouth and I've been called on it. It's either put up or shut up."

Tim said, half-humorously: "You could shut up. I'll promise not to write any more editorials."

"Much obliged. Nope — I'm for it, I guess. Have to give it a try." He saw no reason for mentioning Cathie Stone to his roommate. The girl had nothing to do with his decision.

"Do you think you can make the team?" Tim asked anxiously.

"Why not? I'm still in good condition, and don't forget I was playing first string ahead of some of those guys when we were frosh."

Keith put a ring of confidence into his voice. It was confidence that he did not feel — not at that moment.

3

Poor Start, Good Finish?

CAN you turn out? I'll say you can."

Walt Dewey sounded as though he were pleased, and Keith felt a wave of relief. He had come into the coach's office with some apprehension, hardly knowing what answer his request might bring.

Dewey lifted his long frame from the chair behind his desk and came around to give Keith a quick, appraising glance. The coach had been a great college center not too many years before and after that a star in professional basketball. He had come to Calvert direct from the pro ranks when Frosty Jones retired before the previous season. With his close-cropped hair and freckled face, Walt looked not much older than some of his players.

"You played some ball here for Frosty, didn't you, Elliott?"

The coach's tone was friendly enough, but Keith hesitated. He hoped Dewey would not ask his reasons for turning out after two years' absence from the court. It would be a difficult question to answer truthfully.

"Only as a freshman," Keith said. "Frosty supervised us, but a fellow named Markey did most of the

work with us. He was in graduate school and helped out with the frosh part time."

"What position did you play?"

"Guard. I played center in high school, but we had a better center —" He stopped. He had completely forgotten that Jack Tucker had been the center on that freshman team. "You know — Tucker."

Dewey smiled. "Jack's still a good center, but the way we're fixed, he's more useful at forward. You in good condition?"

He shot the question sharply, and Keith said he hadn't had time since football season to get out of shape.

"Fine. I'll fix it for you to draw a suit this afternoon. We start rolling at four o'clock."

As Keith turned to leave, the coach added, almost as an afterthought: "You'll get all the opportunity possible, but don't be discouraged if you're not playing in every game right away. I haven't cut anyone off the squad yet, and a fellow can stay on the team as long as he's interested. O. K.?"

"Sounds fair enough," Keith acknowledged, a trifle disconcerted. He wondered if Dewey were trying to warn him off in a polite fashion. The coach had given no sign that he knew of Keith's connection with the *Wolf Cry* editorial. Surely he must be aware of it.

"The dickens with that," Keith told himself, frowning. If he proved good enough to make the team — and he was more than half convinced that he would — that would take care of everything. He assumed he could count on no encouragement whatever from the other players, but that simply added zest to the challenge.

He was the last man to appear on the gym floor that afternoon, a minute before four o'clock. Dewey was standing idly on the side line and Keith felt quite self-conscious as he walked across the court to the coach. Jack Tucker, who had been practicing a front turn, stopped abruptly and followed Keith with a long, hard stare.

"Right on time, Elliott," Dewey said, smiling. "You know most of these fellows, I'm sure."

"Not all of them personally. But by sight, yes."

He wasn't sure of all the sophomores' names, but fellows like Herb Hawes, Mel Stine, Dave Sullivan, Fran Minetti, had been his teammates on that freshman team three years ago. The broad-shouldered Hawes shot an inquiring glance at Tucker, but Minetti gave him a friendly wave of the hand in greeting.

Dewey raised a whistle to his lips and blew it sharply.

"All right, let's start off with a few lay-ups. Two lines down at this basket." He looked at Keith. "Fall in with them, Elliott. I know you haven't forgotten this drill."

Keith followed the last man in the right-hand file. It was Hawes, the first-string guard.

"What d'ya say, boy?" he said over his shoulder. "Surprised to see you here."

"Have to keep busy somehow," Keith answered lightly. "Burn off that nervous energy and all that stuff."

Hawes gave a noncommittal grunt. He said nothing more; his turn to shoot was coming up. He darted forward, took a pass from Stine, in the other file, and drove for the lay-up.

Keith moved up, poised on his toes. Hawes rebounded on his own shot, fed Sullivan, who shot in turn, recovered, and then passed to Keith.

Sure that every eye was fixed upon him critically, he dribbled uncertainly for three steps and then pushed the ball up. But he had misjudged his distance and gone in too close to the basket. The ball struck the underside of the rim and almost hit him as it bounced down. He scrambled after it and passed to Tucker, the next shooter, then hurried down to the end of the line.

I certainly messed that up, he thought, ears burning. He had tied up in knots on the simplest kind of practice shot. It was ridiculous.

Next time round he dribbled with more deliberation and dropped the ball over the edge of the hoop. But the brief glow of satisfaction was doused at once by the coach's voice.

"Lay the ball against the backboard, Elliott. That's what the board's for, you know."

The feeling of strangeness began to wear off as the practice progressed. From lay-ups the squad moved on to shooting from a set position, and Keith found himself remembering what to do — sight for the back of the rim, keep his elbow in line with his forward foot as he raised the ball, unlock his wrist just before he sent the shot away.

His timing was off, naturally. But with each succeeding effort he felt his confidence coming back. By the time Dewey blew his whistle again to signal that practice was over, Keith was damp with perspiration, but not at all tired.

"Get the feel of it, Elliott?" The coach came up

behind him as he pulled on his sweat pants.

"A little. I'm pretty rusty, though."

"I'd be surprised if you weren't. Don't try to bear down too much at first."

Keith discovered that his locker adjoined that of Minetti, a senior who had been a regular forward on their freshman team. Fran was tall and angular, with an olive complexion and straight dark hair. He welcomed Keith with a friendly grin.

"Thought you'd given up basketball for good!"

"I might, yet," Keith said, with an answering smile.

"Just thought I'd give it one more whirl."

Minetti peeled out of his upper.

"Good enough. We need all the help we can get."

He paused, frowning. "You saw what the *Wolf Cry* said yesterday?"

Keith nodded, inwardly tense. But the other merely clucked his tongue and said: "Makes it awful tough. A real slap in the face."

"Any truth in it?"

"A little, maybe." Minetti shrugged. "Maybe even more than a little. I don't know that spreading it all over the papers is the way to fix it, though."

He reached for his towel and padded off toward the shower room. Keith followed him slowly. Minetti, for one, obviously did not know of his connection with the editorial. How many others did not?

He found the answer to that question as he left the gym, for Jack Tucker, his face grim, approached him in challenging fashion.

"What kind of grandstand play are you making, Elliott?" he demanded. "And how far do you think

you'll get with it? "

" Oh, come off it, Jack," Keith answered, irritated. " I don't need your written permission to try for the team."

" You've already given us one kick in the pants. Why don't you let us alone? "

Keith's patience gave way.

" Because I want to play basketball! " he snapped. " It's that simple. If I can't make the club, all right, but for heaven's sake stop acting as though I were going to dynamite the gym! "

The captain's eyes blazed.

" Just that simple, is it? A lot you know about this team! Those kids are hurt, plenty hurt. On their own campus they've been called quitters. I know a couple of them that darn near cried when they read that. And then you come strutting out on the court — the guy responsible for the whole dirty mess. Do you actually believe you'll help when they learn that? "

So Tucker had not broadcast his information, Keith thought swiftly. At least, not yet. He stood his ground.

" We went through this last night," he said coldly. " Whether you or anyone else likes it, I'm out for basketball. And I intend to stay out. That's that."

Tucker's lips parted, as though he were about to retort. Instead, he wheeled and strode away, leaving Keith staring after him.

Keith told Tim Robertson about it that night, in answer to his roommate's question.

" But it looks as though Tucker's the only one who knows that I had anything to do with your little masterpiece," he concluded. " If Dewey is wise, he certainly

didn't show it."

Tim blew gently on his glasses and began to polish them again in an absent-minded manner.

"What about Hawes and Stine and the others in our own class?" he asked. "They know we're room-mates, I'm sure."

"They'll find out in time, I suppose." Keith spoke resignedly, then squared his shoulders aggressively. "I don't much care if they do. I'll stand up for my opinion until I'm proved wrong."

"Spoken like a senior sponsor, a true leader of men," Tim said, his eyes twinkling, and Keith snorted.

On the court for the rest of that week, though, he did not feel like a leader, but rather like an uncertain follower. The Calvert squad was still in the experimental stage, so far as the coach was concerned, and there was more time devoted to individual fundamentals than to mastering the patterns of plays.

Once the basic moves — the pass, the dribble, the pivot and turn — were smoothed out, the planning of attack and defense would be simpler. And the Wolf Pack schedule, fortunately, gave them some comparatively easy games before the important Conference race opened.

Keith was unable to tell whether Dewey was paying him much attention. Certainly he was not singled out for special instruction, though several times the coach came over to suggest some correction in his form — to keep the knees bent a little more, to hold the ball just so in making a bounce pass, to protect the ball in proper fashion on a defensive rebound. They were all simple things which Keith had mastered once and had

all but forgotten.

He was more impressed, during those first few days, by the solemn, unsmiling atmosphere of the practice sessions. Oddly enough, it did not seem to come from Dewey. The coach had a light, easygoing way of giving orders, emphatic without being domineering. Yet there was little joking or skylarking among the players.

Is this a big freeze aimed at me? he wondered. But he soon discovered that the grimness seemed to envelop everyone. The intensity appeared to flow from Tucker, who hurled himself into every simple play with a fierce determination, as though each practice shot were terribly important.

It gave Keith a feeling of uneasiness, and eventually he made a guarded inquiry of Fran Minetti.

"This is sure a serious bunch," he ventured. "Nobody smiles. Is Dewey that tough about fooling around?"

"No," the forward said slowly. "Last year there was a lot of monkeying around, as I remember. I guess it's different now because the boys want to show the school they aren't choke artists."

Keith winced inwardly. It would be only a matter of time before that blew up in his face. It would be so much easier to hand back his suit and forget all about basketball, or that he had ever opened his mouth on the subject.

But he shook off the temptation to withdraw. That would be an admission that he had been wrong about the Calvert team, or that he lacked the courage to back up his words. To himself he would concede neither, let alone to Jack Tucker.

I'm sticking, he thought stubbornly.

Next day he had reason for further regret. Walt Dewey held a long scrimmage and Keith was given his first chance under game conditions. As he went in to replace Dave Grant, a slender junior, he speculated briefly on the turn of luck that assigned him to guard Jack Tucker in his first appearance.

The captain came down the side lines with a deft, low dribble. Keith picked him up as he drove for the corner. Tucker passed in to Floyd Michaels, the center, feinted as though to cut for the basket, then stopped.

Michaels, closely guarded in the free-throw lane, snapped the ball back to Tucker. The captain poised with the ball in position for a one-hand push shot as Keith moved in on him, waving a distracting hand before him.

Jack's knee bent slightly, his arm dropped almost imperceptibly. Keith leaped to block the shot.

But the captain did not shoot. At the instant Keith sensed he would send the ball away, Tucker deftly pushed it down toward the floor and cut away to his right for an uninterrupted dribble and drive in to the basket.

His body in the air in the futile jump, Keith could not even try to recover as the captain flashed past him.

"Nice fake, Jack." Dewey sounded approval. "Elliott, you bought that one too soon. Make your man commit himself before you show your move."

Keith nodded somberly, trying to conceal his mortification. He had been completely suckered on the play. Not twice, he resolved.

When Tucker came down court with the ball a min-

ute later, he did not press him so closely. If Jack tried the same fake, Keith would have time to check and regain position.

Tucker passed off, took the return pass, and stopped near the corner. Keith slid with him, carefully, and Jack set himself. Then he hunched his shoulders and thrust a foot forward as though to dribble. Keith moved too, keeping his distance.

Tucker suddenly pulled the foot back, sighted, and fired, a soft push shot. A quick yelp of triumph from Michaels behind him was all Keith needed to tell him that the ball had gone in. Dewey made no comment and Keith required none. He knew Tucker had faked him again, this time into "sagging off" far enough so that Jack had time to shoot unhurriedly.

To his relief, the scrimmage ended before he had to come to grips with the captain again.

No hits, no runs, two errors, he thought ruefully. Was that a look of amusement on Herb Hawes's face? He could hardly resent it. He might find it easy to laugh at a competitor's discomfiture, under the circumstances. Undoubtedly Hawes remembered that as freshmen he had been the substitute and Keith the first-stringer.

Leo Nyland sought him out next morning between classes.

"How's the star of gridiron and hardwood?" he asked, beaming. "I'm coming out to see you strut your stuff tonight, Keith boy."

"Well, keep your eye fixed on the end of the bench," Keith advised him, "because that's where I'll be."

"Honestly?" Leo sounded disappointed. "Oh, you're bound to get in. McKinley isn't very good — we

ought to win in a breeze."

"Look, chum, I wouldn't get in this game if McKinley was a team of one-legged men. I don't even know our plays yet — give me a little time."

"Here I thought you'd just step in and take full charge." Leo's round face had a look of innocence.

"Very funny," Keith said acidly, and the other chuckled.

"I apologize, I just couldn't help tossing that in. How are you getting along with the boys? All one happy family?"

"Not exactly. I'm not quite sure just where I stand, matter of fact. No threats of violence yet, though."

Nyland gave him a shrewd look. "Queer deal, I guess." Then he brightened. "Well, I'll be rooting for you, anyway."

As it had been for the Lake City game, the Calvert pavilion was little more than half-filled as the Wolf Pack came out on the court that night.

Keith, wearing his spanking new blue jersey with the silver numerals "25" on the back, felt a trifle self-conscious during the warm-up. But he soon realized that no one was paying any attention to him, with the possible exception of Tim Robertson and Leo Nyland. He spotted his roommate in the press row, opposite the center circle. Leo and several of Keith's football teammates — George Steele, Joe Varanoff, and two or three others — were sitting in the front row of the end section, directly behind one basket. As Keith, chasing a loose ball, neared the group, Nyland grinned and said, in a stage whisper, "Go, Elliott, go!"

Leo proved correct in one respect; McKinley was no

match for the Wolf Pack. Keith, watching Calvert score the opening tip-off and draw steadily into a commanding lead, decided that the first five — Tucker and Minetti at forward, Michaels at center, Hawes and Stine at guard — made a smooth-working combination. Against a team like the Presidents, anyway.

The first string retired midway in the second quarter, and the Calvert substitutes came to the floor to battle McKinley on even terms in the second half, given the cushion of a 20-point lead. Keith remained on the bench, content to watch. He had been telling the truth when he informed Nyland that he did not yet know the plays. In another week, though, he'd be ready.

Dave Grant, a guard, cut neatly past the pivot man, took a bounce pass going in, and laid the ball up for a field goal. The weary-looking McKinley captain called for a time out.

"We want Elliott! We want Elliott!"

In the comparative quiet which had settled upon the pavilion during the time out, the chorus of half a dozen voices sounded like an explosion in Keith's ears.

Startled, he lifted his head and sought the source. Under the McKinley basket, Nyland, Steele, and the rest of his football comrades were chanting noisily, clapping their hands and stamping their feet. Leo's round face creased with a delighted smile as he caught Keith's eye, and he began to clap with renewed vigor.

Flushing in embarrassment, Keith looked away quickly and fixed his gaze on the floor at his feet. He could wring Leo's neck!

"Friends in the house, I see." Mel Stine, sitting

next to him, sounded amused.

"Yeah," Keith muttered, trying to conceal his annoyance. "Bunch of comics."

He was grateful for the sound of the whistle signaling the resumption of play. For the next few minutes the teams traded basket for basket. Then Grant and Tom Rourke, a red-haired soph, sped down court on a fast break against a single defender.

At the last minute, the retreating McKinley guard lunged for Rourke, who flipped the ball to his teammate. It was a good pass, but Grant failed to handle it cleanly and knocked the ball out of bounds with his foot.

"We want Elliott! We want Elliott!"

Keith writhed inwardly as his friends struck up the chant again. "I'll skin that Lion Man alive when I catch him!" he vowed savagely, meanwhile trying to keep his features blank, as though he heard nothing.

Stine tapped him gently on the thigh.

"You're wanted up front, Keith," he said, grinning.

Walt Dewey was on his feet at the other end of the bench. Keith rose hastily as Nyland's voice sounded loudly: "Yea, Keith boy, let's go now!"

"There seems to be a public demand for your appearance," the coach said dryly. "Go in for Grant. Remember to keep the court balanced, that's all."

Keith could only nod in dumb assent as he divested himself of his warm-up jacket and pants. His impulse to protest that the "public demand" was none of his doing passed quickly. Dewey must be shrewd enough to realize that.

He gave his name to the scorer and ran onto the

court as Calvert lost the ball out of bounds. Grant, still discomfited by his own error, met him with a scowl and pointed abruptly to a McKinley forward.

"That's your man, Number 6."

Keith hitched up his trunks in a nervous gesture as he took his defensive position. He should be delighted at this unexpected chance, he thought. Even though he wasn't familiar with Calvert's many set plays, he couldn't go far wrong if he merely followed the basic rules of good fundamental basketball. There was no pressure on him, either, since the Calvert victory was already assured.

But, thanks to Nyland and his idiotic pals, Keith felt as though every eye in the pavilion were riveted on him. His palms dampened with sweat as he faced the McKinley forward.

The visitors' first thrust came from the other side of the court, and their center moved out to the edge of the keyhole for a deep hook shot. Keith turned and went up for the rebound, but it was Rourke who recovered. The sophomore dribbled quickly away from a McKinley foe, then swung out and snapped the ball across the court.

It was a good pass, and there was no reason why it should go right through Keith's upraised hands. But it did, and there it was, rolling loosely around at the feet of the rooters in the front row.

His face brick-red, Keith scrambled for the ball and handed it to the official rushing up the side line. As he retreated, he heard a gibing, "Hey, Elliott, need gloves?" from the stands.

He closed on the forward. The McKinley guard

passed in to him, then followed the pass quickly and stopped short, setting up a screen for his teammate, in back of Keith.

The forward immediately drove to the inside and Keith went with him at full speed. He did not see the screening guard behind him and collided with that youth, shoulder to shoulder, with an impact that knocked the McKinley player several feet across the court.

Keith had his hand raised to designate the foul almost before the referee's whistle had blown.

"Number 25 — charging!"

No doubt about that, Keith agreed sheepishly, as he took his place on the free-throw lane. The guard's shot rolled slowly around the rim and then off. Keith leaped, clawing for the ball with the McKinley center, and they banged into each other as the sphere bounced off to one side. Again the whistle shrilled.

"Foul on Number 25 — hiping!"

Keith stopped short, involuntarily clapping both hands to his face in shocked surprise as he turned toward the official. He was ready to protest, but checked himself, and slowly raised his arm again to tell the scorer's bench that he was the offender again. That had been a bad call; he hadn't put his hip into the center half as hard as the opponent had elbowed him.

"Fourth down, Elliott!" someone yelled from the stands, as he moved toward the free-throw line. He felt a hand on his elbow and looked around into Grant's face.

"You're out," the junior said, with a touch of sympathy in his voice. Keith, feeling like a bull being

escorted from a china shop, walked slowly to the side lines.

"A little too eager, maybe?" Walt Dewey said gently. "Just one thing, Elliott. No play-acting when a foul is called against you, even if you know it's a bad one. Just put up your hand and leave out the gestures."

Keith nodded and went back to his seat on the bench, like a reprimanded child. He had looked like the squad clown, and Jack Tucker must have been amused. A new thought chilled him. If that Stone girl were in the stands, she must be laughing herself silly.

He could almost hear her saying, contemptuously, "So you were going to make the varsity right away?" The picture was so vivid that he groaned aloud and Mel Stine, at his side, said: "Oh, don't let it throw you, Keith. It's easy enough to tighten up in your first game. We've all been through that."

"What? Oh, yeah. Sure, Mel, I know. Thanks."

He straightened. He was going to make this team if it killed him. And if he had to kill a few guys doing it. He thought grimly that it would be nice to start with Leo Nyland.

But he relented when he saw the obvious distress on Leo's face. The Lion Man and Tim Robertson were waiting for him when he emerged from the dressing room.

"Gee, Keith, I'm awful sorry if our rooting section bothered you," Leo burst out in apology. "But we did want to see you get in the game."

"I'll bet you regret it," Keith said ruefully, giving Nyland a friendly shove. "I wasn't quite ready, was I?"

Leo showed his relief. "Ah, you'll cut it, Keith boy."

No doubt about that."

Robertson's eyes held a look of uncertainty.

"The team didn't look bad tonight," he offered tentatively as he and Keith walked along the path that led to the residence halls.

"You mean it might not need my offer of help?" Keith asked dryly. "I've thought of that too. But Lake City and McKinley didn't give any line on the club. Wait till after Christmas, when the tough ones come along."

"Are you staying here over the holidays?"

"Sure. We've got four games, you know. You can find me in Room 112, Bannerman Hall. Drop in if you're in the neighborhood; the latchstring's always out."

"Oh, swell," Tim said disdainfully. "You can look for me on January second, and not before."

By that time, Keith thought swiftly, he should know where he stood. Someone — Jack Tucker or himself — would have to eat a few words.

4

Keith Drives a Wedge

THE Wolf Pack went up to Canyon City three days after Christmas and Keith Elliott, although he had been there a number of times, looked forward eagerly to the break in the holiday routine. Calvert was playing Kempton in part of a double-header at Canyon City's big Municipal Auditorium, with Superior meeting Hillsdale in the first game. The opportunity to see two of the big Conference teams in action against independent opponents always drew a large crowd, nearly everyone in it rooting valiantly for the independents, Kempton and Hillsdale.

In the ten days since the end of classes, the Wolf Pack had faced three minor foes at home and won all three games. Keith, after his rather ludicrous minute against McKinley, had done rather well, in his own estimation. He had taken part briefly in the first two games, but against Mount Casper, less than a week before, he had played almost the entire second half.

To be sure, Calvert had the game well in hand before Walt Dewey sent him in, and Keith was aware that his performance had been by no means brilliant. But at least it had been steady; he had made no glaring errors

and he had begun to get the feel of the court, and the patterns and the rhythms of the Calvert system.

In fact, he would have been quite bucked up about his own progress had it not been for the atmosphere of grimness surrounding the entire undertaking. Instead, he felt oddly depressed.

This is the queerest bunch I've ever seen, he thought more than once, and wished that Tim Robertson or Leo Nyland were somewhere near, so that he would have someone to listen to him. Nothing, apparently, bound the Calvert squad together once practice had ended. There were no general invitations like, "Come on, who wants to go into town for something to eat?" or, "How about a movie?" — commonplace occurrences on the football team.

On the deserted campus things were dull enough, and Keith would have welcomed any sort of cheerful enterprise, even if it were no more than half a dozen fellows gathered in a room to talk about any subject whatsoever.

But once they had left the training table or the court, the players drifted off in pairs, or even singly. Keith noted that Jack Tucker, like himself, was a "loner." But the captain apparently wanted solitude, while Keith found it forced upon him. It was not a matter of hostility, he decided, for apart from Tucker's tight-lipped chilliness, there was no evidence of resentment toward him.

Rather, it was a matter of being on no terms at all with the rest of the squad, with the possible exception of Fran Minetti. Keith's relationship with the tall forward was friendly, but entirely casual, and Minetti had

given no indication that he wanted to carry it any farther.

That seemed to be the general attitude among the rest of the men too. Mel Stine and Herb Hawes were generally seen together, as were Michaels and Rourke, the two sophomores, who provided practically the only liveliness in the group. The lanky, awkward-looking Michaels had a rather mischievous look on his face, and Keith decided that the center could have been the squad cutup, given half a chance.

"Not with Tucker going around looking like an undertaker, though," Keith told himself.

Except for those two pairs, however, everyone seemed satisfied to keep his own counsel, and Walt Dewey showed no outward concern about the situation.

As the team boarded the bus that was to take them the seventy-mile run to Canyon City, Keith noted that Glenn Nixon, the athletic director, was among the passengers. Nixon was short and chubby, with an animated way of speaking. He was talking earnestly to Dewey as Keith came down the center aisle of the bus, looking for a seat, but he looked up and spoke to him in cordial fashion.

Wonder if he'd be so friendly if he knew who was responsible for that *Wolf Cry* editorial, Keith thought with secret amusement.

There was some desultory talk about the game with Kempton during the ride, but none of the players seemed worried about the outcome, and the conversation soon swung around to Superior and the Tigers' stellar forward, Whitey Scales.

"You'll get a look at a real ballplayer tonight," Mel

Stine said, half-joking, half-serious as he looked at Rourke. "He's got more moves than a snake, that Scales."

"What about Buddy Barnett, of Sequoia?" the redheaded Rourke asked. "I remember watching him last year, and I don't know but what I'd take him over Scales."

"No comparison!" Herb Hawes came in forcefully. "Whitey can go to either side if he wants to drive, or he can go up in the air for a jump shot that nobody can block. And you never know, because he's the best faker I ever saw."

Herb spoke with some fervor and Keith recalled with sympathy that Hawes had been given the task of guarding the Superior star in the two games last season.

Fran Minetti said thoughtfully: "I grant you Barnett is murder when he gets his hook shot working, but you can play him so he has to take some bad ones. Darned if I know what you do about Whitey, though. How about it, Coach?"

He looked across the aisle toward Walt Dewey, who had been listening with obvious interest.

"Scales is very good," the coach replied, with a half-smile. "But let's not worry about him now. It's Kempton we're playing tonight, remember?"

Minetti's olive skin showed a faint flush and he forced a laugh. "Yeah, I almost forgot."

Keith squirmed in irritation. All right, Scales *was* good, but that was no reason to talk about him with such awe, as though he were some hero of mythology, instead of just a basketball player.

All Superior would have to do to lick us tonight

would be to show up on the court, he thought angrily.

However, Superior had to do more than that to handle an aroused Hillsdale team in the first game of the evening. The Wolf Pack watched the first half from the stands with mounting surprise as Scales and his teammates lost the lead in the opening minute and were unable to regain it.

The Tiger forward's hair was a very light blond and close-cropped. From a distance it appeared almost white, hence his nickname. He was solidly built and agile as a cat, but, despite his undeniable ability, Superior as a team seemed unable to untrack itself. The partisan home-town crowd roared with delight as Hillsdale more than matched the Tigers' better ball-handling and court work with startling accuracy on long shots.

Superior encountered bad luck on some of its own shots, which rolled in the hoop and out again. At half time Hillsdale was in front, 30-22, and as the Wolf Pack rose and filed out of its seats toward its own dressing room, wonderment was the keynote of the conversation.

"Can you imagine Superior losing to *that* club?" Dave Sullivan asked, as though he could not believe what he had just witnessed.

"I'll bet Hillsdale hit around 50 per cent," Stine said in admiration. "And all of them from way out. I don't remember that they got a single setup."

They continued to talk about that until Walt Dewey finally shut them off and directed their attention to the game they were going to play in a rather short time. The coach spoke in a matter-of-fact manner, as though

he sensed there was no point in trying to fire up his players for Kempton. As Keith listened, he wondered idly why Dewey did not make the obvious comment about holding an opponent too cheaply, in the light of what Calvert had just seen upstairs on the auditorium floor. But the coach made no reference to Superior.

The manager came in to say that the first game had ended and the Pack moved out into the corridor. As they did, the Superior squad, with the sweat-streaked Scales in the lead, came into sight, headed for an adjoining dressing room. As he caught sight of Jack Tucker, the blond Tiger forward stopped and called out, "Good luck, Jack."

"Thanks, Whitey. How'd you make out, finally?"

Scales lifted his shoulders expressively. "We won by about 15. I think it was 73-58 at the end."

"No kidding?" Tucker showed his surprise. "From what we saw in the first half, you were in real trouble."

The Tiger captain cocked his head and looked at Tucker quizzically.

"Oh, not real trouble, Jack. You ought to know we're going to beat a club like Hillsdale, no matter what happens early."

Now there, Keith thought with a twinge of admiration, was real confidence. He was sure Scales had not meant to sound cocky, that he was merely echoing the solid self-assurance that came with consistent victory. Superior knew it was a better team than Hillsdale. As a result, it played as though it were the better team, all the way, even when things looked black.

We could use a little of that, he thought, although he had to concede that no one seemed greatly con-

cerned about handling Kempton.

That attitude appeared wholly justified at the start. Calvert broke into the scoring column at once as Mel Stine put away a tricky jump shot and Tucker lofted one from the corner. Kempton had a tall, rangy team, but the Knights were not clever and not particularly quick. Their opening efforts to work the ball through the nimble Wolf Pack defenders were unsuccessful. This forced the Knights to shoot long, and while they did not connect on many of these shots from around the 25-foot range, the switch in tactics did uncover a weak spot in the Wolf Pack defense.

That was on the backboards, where Kempton's all-round greater height provided a distinct advantage as they followed in for rebounds on their missed long shots. A forward named Garrison tallied three times on tip-ins over the dogged guarding of Herb Hawes, and the third of these field goals brought Walt Dewey to his feet, frowning.

"Elliott!"

Keith came up, surprise mingling with his pleasure. He had never before replaced a first-stringer so early in the game.

"Keep Garrison off that backboard," the coach said crisply. "That's your main job. Play the safety spot when we have the ball; take your shot if you get a good one, but let Mel do the driving. You stop Garrison!"

"Right." Keith was outwardly calm, inwardly edgy with anticipation. He realized he was being sent in at that moment because he was two inches taller and fifteen pounds heavier than Herb Hawes, but the reasons did not matter. However briefly, he was part of the

Calvert first string. Even Catherine Stone would have to admit that what had sounded like a badly timed boast a month ago had become a reality — for a while.

Hawes came off with a look of frustration on his flushed features. Keith thought he could detect anxiety on Jack Tucker's countenance, as though he doubted the Wolf Pack's ability to stay in front. The scoreboard showed Calvert still leading, 24-17.

But only Michaels, the sophomore, made any noise.

"Come on, we've got 'em," he panted, clapping his hands together sharply. "Let's keep 'em on the hook."

Keith thought: The kid hasn't been around this gloom outfit long enough to be worried. Hope he stays that way.

It proved much easier than he had expected. Garrison, long-armed and long-legged, but not agile, made one try to fake and go around him, but Keith moved with him and the Knight was checked. He dropped back again and shot quickly. Keith wheeled, eyes on the arching ball, sensed Garrison behind him and swung slightly to the right, arms outspread as he bent his knees to jump, keeping Garrison to the outside.

The ball bounded off the rim and they went up together as the Kempton center leaped in from the other side. But Keith kept one elbow crooked high to block off the center and Garrison, still behind him, could not overreach his opponent as he had the smaller Hawes. Keith came down spread-legged, hunched over the ball, and Kempton retreated to defensive position. With a glow of accomplishment, Keith leisurely tossed the ball across the back court to Stine, and the Wolf

Pack surged to the attack.

Garrison scored just one more field goal before the half ended, and that was on a long one. But he did not get a single rebound. Using his height and weight to the utmost advantage, Keith not only kept the forward blocked out of the area under the basket but was able to give Michaels some help in handling the Kempton center.

Shut off on the backboards, the Knights' brief threat petered out, and the Wolf Pack was in full command, 38-23, when the buzzer sounded. Keith's only contribution to the point total was a free throw, one of two opportunities he was given because of Garrison's overzealousness in attempting to follow on shots. Otherwise, he adhered faithfully to Dewey's instructions and let Stine direct the play.

Between the halves Dewey said: "You did a first-class job on Garrison, Keith. Stay with it."

Keith warmed inwardly and cast a quick look around the dressing room. Hawes sat glumly in a corner, while Tucker talked in a low voice to Stine, pausing occasionally to suck on half a lemon. The captain looked up once and his eyes met Keith's, but only for an instant, and Tucker's expression did not alter.

He wouldn't give me a smile if I scored 100 points all by myself, Keith thought, grinning to himself. He was certain Jack would like nothing better than to see him fall on his face.

However, he did no such thing in the second half. Kempton changed its tactics somewhat, but Keith had found the answers as far as Garrison was concerned, and Calvert maintained control of its own backboard.

Midway in the third period, Garrison gave way to a smaller but speedier man. The new forward crossed Keith on his first try, the "give and go" maneuver. He passed to the corner and cut at once for the basket and the return pass from his teammate. Keith was a split second tardy in recovering his balance, and the Knight flashed past him on the inside to take the pass unguarded and lay the ball in for an easy field goal.

Stine, scooping up the ball as it dropped through the netting, gave Keith a mildly reproving look, and Keith, swallowing his discomfiture, set himself to the task of seeing that it did not happen again.

In this, his advantage in height and weight served him well. So long as he kept himself balanced and was careful to protect against a possible drive past him on the inside, his foe's quick feints and starts went for nought. Keith repeatedly checked the dribbler or forced him to the outside, and eventually the new forward had to fall back on long shots over Keith's flagging arms. He did sink two of these, but meanwhile Tucker and Stine were driving through the Kempton guards or setting up screens for set shots by Minetti and Michaels. By the end of the third quarter Calvert had a 20-point lead and Dewey sent in an entire new five.

"Easy does it, eh, boy?" Minetti said as he and Keith sank back on the bench. "You took care of that tall drink of water pretty good."

Pleased, Keith shrugged. "Oh, he wasn't as much trouble as that little Number 9 they put in later. He caught me with my feet crossed a couple of times. You didn't do so dirty yourself, Fran. How many'd you get? Twelve or fourteen, anyway, I guess."

Minetti wiped his face with a towel. "Seventeen, I think," he replied, with an air of indifference. "They never did figure out how to break up our double screen. Not a very sharp team."

Always there, Keith thought, concealing his irritation — always that undertone of apology, lack of assurance. Kempton was not in Superior's class, admittedly, but Calvert had won easily and competently. Yet Minetti was saying, more or less: "We're really not as good as we looked. Anyone could beat Kempton."

That was Jack Tucker's fault, Keith decided resentfully. If the captain went around wearing a death mask, the rest of the squad could hardly be blamed for persistent self-doubt.

However, there was no cloud of doubt on the beaming countenance of Glenn Nixon when the game was over. The chubby athletic director, standing outside the door to the dressing room in the company of a handsome white-haired man of middle age, greeted each player with a pat on the shoulder and some word of praise.

"Who's the distinguished-looking gent with Nixon?" Keith heard Tom Rourke ask curiously, once inside the dressing-room door.

"Jim Madison," Stine answered, adding solemnly: "Big alumni power. He pays your salary, Tom."

"My salary!" the sophomore exploded, his voice rising almost to a squeak. "I pay my own way at Calvert — I don't even get a free sandwich!"

Rourke subsided sheepishly as the general laughter revealed that he was being kidded. Keith reflected that Madison undoubtedly did help some Calvert students.

Not all of them were athletes, either, for the alumnus had the reputation of being genuinely interested in his alma mater. He was eager to see Calvert attract promising scholars as well as promising football or basketball players. Keith guessed that Nixon and Madison were not discussing scholarship at the moment. That new gym was more like it.

Keith took his time under the shower and the team manager chided him as he came back to his locker.

"Step on it, Elliott, will you please? We don't want to hold that bus forever."

"O. K., O. K.," Keith answered good-naturedly, and began to dress swiftly. The last of his teammates was going out the door, past Nixon, Madison, and Walt Dewey. As Keith hurriedly jammed his game togs into his small handbag, Dewey departed with a wave to the other two men, leaving only the manager, industriously putting basketballs into the big canvas sack.

As Keith crossed the room toward the door, he heard Nixon's voice.

"Elliott, step over here a minute, will you?"

He stopped and Nixon said: "I'd like you to meet James Madison. You know of him, I'm sure."

Smiling, the alumnus extended his hand. His blue eyes were keen and penetrating.

"I'm sure he doesn't," he remarked easily. "But I know of him. I hope we have a tackle half as good next fall."

Embarrassed, Keith murmured some faint protest.

"Elliott turned out for basketball just a few weeks ago," the athletic director explained briskly. "Looks like we've really got a winner this year, doesn't it?"

The question was directed at Keith, who was wholly unprepared. He hesitated noticeably before he answered: "Well, I guess so — maybe. It could be."

His hesitancy had not escaped Madison's notice.

"You're not so sure?"

Keith was aware that Nixon was frowning at him intently. He could try to make a quick recovery by assuring Madison that he felt a great season was in prospect. That would please the athletic director, but Keith felt suddenly that it would now strike an unconvincing note with the alumnus. He resolved instantly to say what he thought.

"I think it could be a pretty good team." He met Madison's gaze boldly. "It depends on a number of factors."

"That's rather a cautious answer." Madison was still smiling, but his eyes were serious. "I gather you have some reservations. Would you mind telling me what they are?"

"I'm sure Elliott didn't mean it that way, Jim," Nixon broke in hastily. He seemed upset by the trend of the conversation.

"Didn't he?" Madison asked mildly, looking inquiringly at Keith, who felt uncomfortably like a witness on the stand. But he was rescued at that moment by the manager, who slung the sack of basketballs over his shoulder and said irritably: "Come on, Elliott, let's go. The bus is waiting."

"Sorry, I have to run," he said quickly, turning toward the door. "Pleased to have met you, Mr. Madison."

He went out on the manager's heels, glad to escape

the exasperated expression on Nixon's face. He would get called for it, he knew, once they were on their way home.

But, to his relief, the bus started up as soon as he had boarded it. Nixon, he discovered, was remaining in Canyon City for several days.

"Thank goodness," he breathed.

But he knew it would be merely a temporary respite. He would hear from Nixon before very long — of that he was quite certain.

5

The Raid

SO YOU'RE the first-stringer now?" Tim Robertson slammed his empty suitcase shut and tossed it carelessly into a closet. The Christmas holidays were over, and all that day the students had been streaming back to the campus for the beginning of the winter quarter on the morrow.

Keith, who had made a few halfhearted moves to help his roommate unpack, said: "Oh, nothing as definite as that, Tim. But I did make some progress during the last two weeks. While you were sitting around at home taking it easy," he added pointedly.

"Taking it easy?" Tim pretended to be quite wounded. "That's an unkind thing to say to me, your boyhood chum. I was thinking every minute — thinking up ways to further your career at Calvert."

"Oh, swell."

Tim dropped his joking manner. "Seriously, Keith, how did it go? Coming up on the train this evening I heard a lot of talk about the team. Pretty hopeful talk, as though this might be Calvert's year. Six straight wins, you know."

Keith made a face.

"The last time I was asked a question like that, nobody liked my answer. Would you like the horrible details?"

Briefly, he recounted his conversation with Glenn Nixon and James Madison a few nights before, and Robertson's eyes glistened with appreciation as he listened.

"Oh, brother!" he murmured when Keith had finished. "Nixon must be ready to fry you in oil. What did he say afterward?"

"I haven't seen him yet," Keith growled. "He stayed in Canyon City, but I expect he'll be back this week." He ran a hand through his straight sandy hair and his gray eyes were bleak.

"What was I supposed to say?" he demanded, half in exasperation, half bewildered. "That it was positively the greatest team in the world?"

"I guess Glorious Glenn would have wanted something like that," Tim said frankly. "After all, he wants to sell Madison on the idea of a new gym. But that's no reason why you should be two-faced about it, if you don't think we're such a hot club. And I gather you don't."

"I don't know, blast it!" Keith exclaimed. "Those six straight wins look good on paper, but I've heard a few things on the club that make me wonder how it's going to stand up in the tough games. I'll wait and see how we do against Mid-State on Friday before I go overboard."

"You mean, if we lose to Mid-State, we haven't got what it takes?" Tim asked carefully.

"Not so much if we lose, but how we lose," Keith

answered significantly.

Robertson obviously was about to pursue the subject further, but at that moment the quiet of the night was shattered by a hoarse, taunting cry.

"Yea-a-a, frosh! Arise and salute the mighty sophomore class of Umpty-eight! "

"Oh, oh! " Robertson spoke softly. " A raid? "

He darted to the window and peered out into the darkness.

" I hope not," Keith said. " Probably just some soph driving past the hall and deciding to sound off."

At that moment another jeering shout was heard outside.

" Bow down, bow down, you silly frosh — bow down to your lords and masters, the class of Umpty-eight! "

Now windows began to go up noisily and from every floor of Bannerman Hall came answering gibes from the freshman occupants. Tim and Keith exchanged looks of resignation.

" Sounds like the real thing, Tim. Come on, let's see what we can do."

" Wow! " Robertson jumped at a crashing sound below their window. " There goes somebody's chair."

They flung open the door and went out into the corridor, now thronged with freshmen. Bright-eyed with excitement, the first-year men milled through the hall to cries of: " All out, frosh, all out! Soph raid! Soph raid! Everybody out! "

Keith reached out and grasped one hurrying youth by the arm.

" All right, Vincent, let's simmer down," he said

soothingly, but with firmness. "Let's not start any stampede."

Vincent squirmed in Keith's grip.

"The sophs!" he protested. "They're here! They're here!"

"They'll go away," Keith replied. They always did. In the first days of each new term, the freshman sponsors usually had to meet this same situation, as exuberant sophomores touched off the raid that had existed as a Calvert tradition for years.

True, it was a tradition that university officials would have liked to see die away, for it had been known to end in fist-swinging and a toll of torn clothing and broken furniture as the embattled freshmen sometimes hurled furniture out their windows at the tormenters. But recognizing the difficulty of restraining hundreds of high-spirited youngsters in occasional outbursts of this nature, the university had not forbidden them outright. Instead, it had placed upon the senior sponsors the responsibility of holding such uprisings within relatively harmless bounds.

At that moment, however, Keith viewed the crowded corridor with mounting uneasiness. This might soon expand beyond all control. He released his grasp on Vincent and raised his voice in a shout.

"All you frosh — back to your rooms! Break it up, break it up!"

A few faltered, hesitating, at the command, but even though Tim took it up at once, there was far too much noise for many to hear it. At the far end of the hall, Keith could make out the harassed faces of George Steele and Pete Mead, the two sponsors who lived in

the other wing on the same floor. They were having equal difficulty trying to quiet the ruckus, which appeared to be centered around a spot near the stairway leading up from the second floor.

Suddenly Keith realized the purpose of that confused milling.

“ Tim, quick! They’re after the fire hose! ”

He began to force his way roughly through the crowd with Robertson at his heels, while Steele and Mead bore down from the opposite direction. A whooping, yelling line of frosh had unreeled the coiled hose from its frame on the stairway and were carrying it through the open door of a room opposite. Their obvious intention was to thrust the nozzle out the window and drench the sophomores now gathered outside the entrance to Bannerman.

Keith and Steele reached the door at the same time.

“ Pete! Tim! Turn it off! ” Keith shouted as he turned into the room, Steele at his shoulder. As though he were leading the fullback through an enemy line, Keith charged for the window. The two freshman holding the hose there were jerked back rudely and hurled into the middle of the room as the two sponsors fastened hands upon their shoulders.

But they were not in time to save the sophomore attackers from a wetting. A spurting stream of water had already struck the group beneath the window, and dreadful cries of vengeance were rising as Keith clutched the loose hose, now writhing like a huge snake. Then suddenly the water subsided to a trickle. Tim and Pete Mead had reached the faucet.

Steele leaned out the window and yelled threateningly.

"Go on home, sophs! Beat it before you get yourselves in trouble!"

He pulled back quickly and there was unmistakable alarm on his rugged features.

"We'd better get downstairs quick," he panted. "There's a real fight going on the steps!"

They turned and raced out of the room.

"Fight in front!" Keith ripped out at Robertson and Mead as he fled down the stairs and heard them clattering after him.

A confused melee was in progress outside the entrance. In the darkness, illuminated only by the pale yellow of the room lights shining through the windows, there was no distinguishing between freshman and sophomore, but that did not matter. Keith saw half a dozen of the other sponsors trying to separate the broken groups of combatants before he plunged into the fray.

Almost at his feet two youths were threshing around on the grass, punching futilely at each other. Keith reached down and wrenched roughly at the uppermost fighter, hauling him erect and then flinging him back toward the dormitory. The other he pulled up, spun around, and shoved, sending him stumbling in the other direction.

At his shoulder, another pair had squared off and were flailing away wildly. He moved in, took a blow in the chest and closed a big hand on a free arm of each.

"You maniacs!" Keith gritted, glaring from one to

the other ferociously as he held them motionless in his grip for an instant. Then he let go, and the erstwhile enemies scurried away with alarmed looks on their faces.

Panting, he whirled to look for more work. But by this time the presence of the sponsors had made itself felt. The bulk of the raiding party had melted away and there were only isolated knots of fighting still going on. These the seniors were breaking up as fast as they could get to them.

Suddenly Keith's eye caught two men wrestling furiously some yards to his left, almost hidden in the darkness where the lawn gave way to a paved path.

"Hey, you two — that's all!" he shouted as he darted toward them. At that moment, one of them arched his back in a mighty heave and hurled his opponent to the ground. There was an ominous sound as the falling youth's head struck the stone-flagged pavement of the path.

The other man stood transfixed as though with horror for an instant, then looked up briefly and his eyes bored into those of the onrushing senior. In the next second, he had turned and raced away into the blackness.

Keith faltered, uncertain whether to take up the pursuit. But the sight of the fallen lad sent a shaft of fear through him. He stopped and dropped to his knees beside the still form.

"Tim! Georgel!" he called frantically. "Over here! Man hurt!"

They came toward him on the run. As he bent over the unconscious freshman, Keith's deep concern was split by a surge of helpless anger at Floyd Michaels. For the man whose frightened gaze had met his own

for one frozen instant had been the sophomore center, now running away in panic.

The twelve seniors who gathered in the outer office of Calvert's dean of men next morning shortly before noon were a subdued lot. They knew they had been summoned by Dean Graham to receive some kind of dressing down for the previous night's uproar. When they spoke, it was in little more than whispers.

"I hear young Getz is all right," Pete Mead said in a low voice to Keith. "A slight concussion, that's all."

Keith nodded. "I heard that too. He'll be out of the hospital tomorrow. How about that for your first day in college? You know, he was entering in winter quarter and last night was his first on the campus?"

"Honest? Well, I wouldn't blame him if he packed up and went home." Mead grinned wryly. "Man, that could have been real nasty, though. When I saw the kid lying there, I was scared to death."

"You think I wasn't?" Keith forced a smile, but his gray eyes were troubled. It had been something of a nightmare, the hours that had followed the raid. The sight of the injured freshman had ended all activity as if by magic, and the frosh had crept quietly back to their rooms. But none of the sponsors had drawn an easy breath until Getz had been taken to the hospital and they had been informed by the doctor who made a quick examination that the lad was not seriously hurt.

Keith felt limp as a rag as he and Tim Robertson slowly climbed the stairs to their room. He did not tell his roommate that he had recognized Floyd Michaels. It had been an accident, of course; the soph center had

simply been too husky for the freshman whom he had drawn as an adversary, purely by chance. The wonder of it was that more men hadn't been injured in the wild affray, with dozens of them wrestling or punching one another.

Still, Michaels was in line for some punishment, Keith thought. If he were identified as Getz's assailant, he would get probation, at the very least, from Dean Graham. And probation would mean that Floyd couldn't play basketball that season.

Keith squirmed inwardly. It was his duty as a sponsor to report Michaels in this incident, and, frankly, he did not want to. To put the finger on a student was one thing, but to single out one's own teammate was another. He was no intimate friend of Michaels, but he could guess what the reaction of Jack Tucker and some of the others might be in those circumstances.

"But I'll have to do it if no one else does," he told himself bleakly. Maybe someone else had spotted Floyd in the darkness; maybe Getz himself had recognized him, even though it was the freshman's first night on the campus. After all, Floyd's picture had been on the sports pages several times.

His inward uncertainty was interrupted at that moment by the dean's secretary.

"Mr. Graham will see you now, gentlemen."

Exchanging glances of resignation, the sponsors filed slowly into the inner office, where John Bliss Graham, dean of men, awaited them. He was a white-haired man, with a weather-beaten countenance and a pair of twinkling blue eyes that gave him the appearance of an elderly cherub. He was known as an eminently fair

man, one who understood and appreciated the coltishness of exuberant undergraduates, but who also could be stern when the occasion demanded. It was quite obvious to his uneasy audience that they were going to see the stern side of the coin now.

"A sorry affair, last night," he began crisply. "I realize that these sometimes harmless exchanges may get out of hand. But when one student requires hospital attention and some hundreds of dollars worth of property is damaged, I think that you seniors, you sponsors, must shoulder some of the responsibility. That's fair, is it not?"

There was the sound of shifting feet and throats being cleared nervously, but no one offered a reply. Everyone sensed that none was expected.

What Dean Graham had to say consumed the next ten minutes and made it clear that, henceforth, the sponsors would have to enforce a discipline much stricter than he had hoped would be necessary.

"Obviously we could not penalize everyone involved in last night's disgraceful episode, even if we knew who they were," the dean continued. "However, the cost of the damaged university property will be assessed equally against the class treasuries of the sophomore and freshman classes. That may result in reducing the splendor of the spring dances planned by those classes," he added dryly, "but I think it is equitable. In addition, the student responsible for the injury to young Getz has been suspended for the balance of the school year."

Keith gave a start. Someone else *had* recognized Michaels! He felt a twinge of sympathy for Floyd, but

he was immensely relieved too. At least he did not have to share in delivering that blow to the basketball team.

Dean Graham dismissed the group a moment later, warning the sponsors that they would be held to account should there be any further disturbances like that of the previous night.

"Well, considering what a riot it was, it could have been worse," Pete Mead observed philosophically, once they were outside. "Kind of tough on the one guy who got caught, though."

Still gladdened by his escape from an unpleasant duty, Keith answered without thinking. "Walt Dewey will be plenty unhappy about it, all right."

Mead and Tim Robertson stared at him and then spoke in unison.

"Dewey? Where's he come in?"

Keith, wishing he had not spoken, answered in some confusion.

"Well, it was Floyd Michaels — I think that's who got suspended," he said lamely. "I was pretty sure I recognized him last night as he ran away."

"Oh!" Mead looked blank. "If it's Michaels, that's going to hurt, all right. Still, the kid should have more brains than to join in on nonsense like last night. It's not his fault that frosh didn't get his head split open."

There was a murmur of assent from some of the others who had been listening, and the group broke up. Tim and Keith walked off together, and when they were out of earshot of the others, the editor said mildly, "You didn't mention recognizing Michaels last night."

Keith scowled.

"Well, if you must know, I didn't intend to say any-

thing about it," he said irritably. "I was hoping someone else would recognize him, and someone else did. You can understand why I wouldn't want to be the man to turn in one of my own teammates."

"Oh, sure." Robertson sounded sympathetic. "But supposing he hadn't been identified? Would you have told Dean Graham?"

"Supposing, supposing!" Keith answered sarcastically. He wished Tim would drop the subject, for he was not certain just what he would have done under those circumstances. "I have plenty of problems without making up imaginary ones. Haven't you?"

Tim eyed him quizzically. "Imaginary ones are the best, I think, because you don't really have to solve them," he said finally, and there it rested.

The news that Michaels had been lost struck the basketball squad like a physical blow. Tom Rourke, the sophomore guard, was relating the news to a group of incredulous listeners as Keith came into the gym that afternoon, and Minetti, seeing him enter, called, "Hey, Keith, have you heard about Michaels?"

"The suspension? Yes, I know about it."

"Already?"

"The sponsors heard about it early," Keith assured him wryly. "We spent some time on Dean Graham's carpet this morning."

Minetti said, "Ah!" in a tone of understanding. Rourke, excited in his role of bearer of news, said eagerly: "Floyd's left the campus by now. He came round to say good-by to me this morning. He wanted to get away as fast as he could. Poor guy — he felt terrible!"

"He can always come back in the fall, Tom," Keith

pointed out. "I feel sorry for him, but, by George, I feel sorry for the kid who got hurt, too."

"Yeah, that could have been serious," Herb Hawes put in. He sounded glum. "But losing Michaels right now sure puts us in a hole. What a rotten break!"

"I suppose Tucker will move to center," Minetti said soberly. "He's played it before. That means scraping up another forward, though. And just before the Mid-State game too."

"Come on, let's not borrow trouble," Keith said with forced cheerfulness, to hide his irritation at the mournful attitude of the two first-stringers. "We've still got five men left, you know."

"And nobody's licked us yet, have they?" Rourke asked brightly. "We can take State, even without Floyd."

"Maybe so," Hawes said, but his voice lacked conviction.

6

Extremely Personal

I IMAGINE all of you have heard that we've lost Michaels?" Walt Dewey squatted on his haunches with the Calvert squad ringed around him on the practice court. There was no mistaking the concern in his manner and Keith realized that the coach's crew haircut and freckled face no longer gave him an air of boyishness. Not with his features set in such serious lines.

"There's no use wailing about it, but we're going to miss Floyd," Dewey went on, toying absently with the whistle which hung from his neck. "We'll have to do some shifting around, and we don't have much time.

"Now you fellows have been exposed to some peculiar criticism." The coach suddenly looked around the group. Keith fidgeted. Was it his imagination, or had Dewey's glance lingered significantly on him?

"I won't go into that," Walt added quickly. "I just wanted to make it clear that I hadn't overlooked it. O. K., that's that. Now, Jack," he spoke directly to Tucker, "how would you like to play center?"

"Anywhere you need me, Coach." Tucker spoke earnestly, and it was evident he had anticipated the move.

"Good boy. Stine, did you ever play forward? No? Well, you can start learning today." He smiled faintly

at Mel. "The theory is the same as for guards — just put the little ball through the little hoop."

This evoked a ripple of laughter and dispelled the growing tenseness that seemed to be hanging over the squad. When Dewey said cheerfully, "All right, let's get at it, men," the players split up for the warm-up drill with enthusiastic chatter. But it had rather a forced ring in Keith's ears.

"Elliott, come here a moment, will you?" Keith whirled out of line at Dewey's voice.

"Were you ever much of a shot, high school or frosh? Give me your honest opinion."

Taken aback by the direct question, Keith blinked.

"Not much," he said frankly. "I never did a lot of shooting. When I was a prep, I was kind of clumsy and I was used mostly, on account of my size, on defense. And in my freshman year we had some pretty slick operators and Frosty Jones let them do the shooting."

The coach nodded as though his thoughts had been confirmed.

"Well, you seem to have a nice, easy motion on that right-hand push shot, and I wish you'd work on it whenever you get a chance from now on. Come out for practice a little early each day and get in a few extra tries. Can you do that?"

"Yes, sir." Keith's answer was emphatic.

"Good. Stay out around 25 feet. We're going to need a scoring threat from outside or else everyone will collapse his defense around us right under the basket."

So he was officially a first-stringer, Keith thought as he rejoined the file of shooters. He was not greatly elated, somehow, for he knew he had more or less

backed into the job. If Michaels hadn't been removed, Keith reflected, I'd still be fighting it out with Herb Hawes.

Later in the session, Dewey called the new line-up together and sent them against the seconds in a brief scrimmage. The results were not encouraging. Tucker and Stine, playing in positions with which they were unfamiliar, showed an understandable uncertainty. Passes went wild and the forwards seemed to cut in the wrong direction more often than not. As error followed on error, the enthusiasm which had flared briefly at the start of practice melted away. By the time Dewey called it off, gloom hung over the court like a heavy fog.

"That was positively the worst workout I've ever seen," Mel Stine growled in disgust, slamming the door of his locker.

Keith too felt discouraged, but he attempted to soothe his teammate.

"Relax, Mel. You didn't expect to learn a new job in one day, did you?"

"No, and I don't expect to learn it in four days, either." Stine strode off in the direction of the showers, swinging his towel angrily. Keith sighed as he bent down to unlace his shoes. He knew how Mel felt. Mid-State was coming into the Calvert pavilion in four days and Calvert certainly was far from ready for the Bobcats.

But the next day was a little better and the next one a little better than that. As Fran Minetti remarked, they had to improve over that Monday practice, since there was no way for them to get worse. To be sure, Jack Tucker lacked Michaels' size and some of the cap-

tain's speed and cleverness had to be sacrificed at his new position. And Mel Stine wasn't even close to Tucker as a forward and Hawes was not Stine's equal as a ball handler. The Pack had lost some strength at every position because of the switched assignments.

Still, as Keith told Tim Robertson, it wasn't such a bad team.

"If everyone came up with his top game, we'd beat State," he confided to his roommate. "And with Michaels we could beat Superior, Sequoia, or whatever — at least on our own court."

"I didn't realize Floyd made that much difference," Tim said. "After all, he was only a sophomore who'd played how many games on the varsity? Six altogether."

"That's why he was especially valuable to this particular club — because he was only a sophomore."

"Come again on that one," Robertson said, with a blank look.

"He wasn't overawed by Mid-State or Superior or any other team," Keith explained. "He'd never played against 'em, so he wasn't carrying around any memories of the lickings they've handed Calvert in the last few years. Just five guys in basketball suits — that's the way Floyd would have looked at all of 'em, I'm positive."

"I see." Robertson removed his glasses, pulled out a handkerchief, and began the familiar routine of polishing them slowly. Then he asked, "Keith, who turned Michaels in to the dean's office?"

Keith stared at him. "Why, Getz, I suppose."

Tim shook his head.

"No, he didn't. Getz didn't know Floyd from a

bale of hay. It was the kid's first day on the campus, remember."

Two crimson disks appeared on Keith's cheeks, and his shoulders went back as he absorbed his roommate's meaning.

"You seem to be full of information about Getz," he said ominously, but Robertson met it with an impatient wave of his hand.

"Don't be an idiot," he said acidly. "I know you didn't do it. But you surprised everyone when you popped out with Michael's name after we left the dean's office. And you said you'd recognized him."

"Well? I did," Keith snapped. "He recognized me, too, I'll bet."

"O. K., O.K.," Tim said placatingly. "I'm just letting you know that several of your brother sponsors flapped their ears when they heard you. Since Getz came back to his room yesterday, at least four that I know of have visited him and inquired oh, so casually, if he knew the guy who dropped him on his head."

"Go on." Keith sounded grim.

"Getz says absolutely not. Floyd was just the nearest man when he rushed out, full of college spirit, looking for action. He'd never seen Michaels before, didn't get a good look at his face even when they were fighting, and wouldn't know him again if he fell over him in an alley. When he got out of the hospital, the kid says, is when he learned Floyd had been bounced because of the affair. That's all he knows — and I'm convinced he's telling the truth."

"You've talked to him yourself?" Keith asked stiffly.

"That I did, and there's no use in your looking

wounded. I wasn't questioning your word. But it occurred to me that Hector (that's Getz's first name, incidentally) might have identified Floyd himself and then got panicky and backtracked when he realized he'd knocked the varsity center out of school. Even though he had a perfect right, under the circumstances. You know how some kids are."

"I gather you don't think that's what happened, though?"

"Nope, I believe him," Robertson said soberly. "Hector Getz is one of the greenest frosh you ever saw, Keith — a real Willie-off-the-pickle-boat from some little town on the coast. He not only hasn't heard of Michaels before this — he's probably never even heard of you. That's how green Hector is."

"Very funny," Keith said with heavy sarcasm. But he was more than a little disturbed. "So I'm being charged — or credited — with turning Michaels over to Dean Graham? Is that it?"

"I rather think so," Tim answered quietly. "Thought you might as well know." He replaced his glasses, peered intently at Keith, who was scowling at the wall.

"I appreciate your telling me," Keith said finally. "I would have done it if someone else hadn't, since it's part of my job as a sponsor here. So let 'em think what they want. It doesn't matter to me."

But he knew it did matter. He hoped Walt Dewey, if he had heard it, did not believe it.

Jack Tucker turned his dark head and looked around inquiringly at his teammates before he stepped gin-

gerly into the center circle to face the Mid-State pivot man for the jump. From the stands, almost filled, came an incessant drumming of expectant feet as the Calvert yell leaders whooped it up.

Behind Tucker and a few feet to his left, Keith Elliott waited, body bent from the waist, feet spread, hands resting on his knees. From the corner of his eye he watched Adams, the Mid-State forward, a square-shouldered youth with the snarling bobcat of Mid-State on the front of his jersey. Adams was his man.

Keith's features were expressionless, but inside he was wound as tight as the mainspring of a watch. It was always that way on the football field, veteran and rookie alike. But once the whistle sounded, the ball went sailing down the field, the tightness went away, and you settled down to business. He supposed it would be just the same on the basketball court. At the moment he wasn't sure.

Then the ball was in the air and Tucker was leaping against the Bobcat center. The Bobcat outreached Jack, banged it off to the forward on the other side of the court. Adams made a quick feint to the outside, then came back toward the middle, driving up the center lane to take the pass from his teammate.

Keith had to change direction and slide to his right in a hurry. He had no time to maneuver, but he was going to stick with Adams. He and the Bobcat and the ball arrived at the same spot at exactly the same time.

The impact drove Keith staggering backward, but it knocked Adams sprawling to the floor and the ball bounded away aimlessly. The whistle sounded and one of the two officials pointed to Keith.

"Foul on Number 25 — charging. You shoot one, Number 14."

Keith kept his face impassive as he raised one arm for the scorer's identification. His fault, all right. He'd have to watch for overeagerness.

Adams gave him a stare as he stepped to the foul line and sank the shot with an easy, graceful one-hand push.

"O. K., let's go," Herb Hawes said to nobody in particular as he scooped up the ball, stepped out of bounds under the bucket, and lobbed it in to Keith.

Keith fired it back and trotted down the court. Hawes would do most of the feeding to the front line. Dewey had briefed them thoroughly on that.

"We'll have to set a long post, with Tucker out around the keyhole," the coach had instructed. "We want that big Mid-State center to come out after him, so we have room to move under the basket. But if your man, Elliott, drops back on Jack to try double timing him, I want you to shoot. You too, Hawes."

Tucker came out to the edge of the key as the forwards crossed behind him and cut up the side line. Hawes faked, started to dribble, but was checked by the Bobcat guarding him. He pivoted and held up the ball, motioning Keith to come over.

As Keith obediently raced behind him, Herb snapped the ball to him and darted for the opposite side to take a return pass. For one split second, as the Mid-State defenders changed position to cover the crossing guards, Keith glimpsed an open straight line between him and the basket, 30 feet away.

Afterward he realized that it was a poor move, even if he had been an expert dribbler. But there was the open-

ing and he turned into it instinctively, bouncing the ball hard and gathering speed with each step. He was past the Bobcat forward in two strides and going like a truck on a downgrade when the Mid-State guard loomed directly in his path.

Keith could not have halted then if he wanted to. He cast one hurried glance at the basket, now only a few feet distant, and launched himself into the air, the ball in his right hand. As he pushed it off the tops of his fingers, he hoped the guard would get out of his way.

Then his knees struck something and the floor rushed up to meet him. He had just time enough to duck his head under and take the fall on the back of his shoulders, like a somersaulting acrobat. The guard had held his ground, although turning his back into Keith's charge, and literally tripped him in mid-air.

He lay flat on his back for a moment before Fran Minetti grabbed one hand and helped him rise, a little shaken. Fran was grinning, and Keith guessed he must have looked pretty silly, but at that moment the referee's finger waved under his nose.

"The foul's on you, 25! You were charging!"

Another one! Keith's chagrin mounted, but was cut short by Jack Tucker's insistent voice.

"What about the field goal, Ref? It counts, doesn't it?"

The official nodded briskly, strode over to the scorer's bench to confirm it, and Keith began to feel a little better, as well as mildly surprised that his almost blind shot had been good. But after the Bobcat guard had sunk his free throw, Hawes muttered: "O. K., that's 4 points you've scored, Elliott. Two for us and 2

for them. Try not to kill anybody."

This time the Wolf Pack set up the play, Stine coming past Tucker on the post and taking a nifty back-handed bounce pass from the captain that put him right under the bucket for a clean two-pointer. It was done so adroitly that Keith could not repress yelling, " Oh, pretty, Jack! " at Tucker. If the latter heard it, he gave no sign.

Mid-State came down on the run, catching the Calvert back line of defenders out of position. But the center hurried his shot needlessly and the ball bounced off the backboard and rolled toward the side line. Keith and Adams were nearest and Keith got there first by half a step. As he reached for the ball he turned his hip toward the Mid-State pursuer to guard against a possible collision. Adams hit him and stumbled out of bounds into the first row of spectators.

" Foul on 25 — hiping! "

Keith whirled, scarlet with indignation, as the official came toward him. Then, as a tremendous wave of booing against the decision descended from Calvert rooters, he remembered Dewey's warning. He shut his lips tightly and held up his hand for the third time.

Adams, shaking his head as though to clear it of cobwebs, walked slowly toward the free throw line and as he passed Tucker, Keith heard him ask sarcastically, " Jack, why don't you tell that lunatic football season is over? "

He did not catch the captain's answer, and a few seconds later Dave Grant came out to replace him. A scatter of hand clapping interrupted the jeering directed at the officials as Keith walked scowling toward the

bench. Dewey motioned him to a seat next to him.

"That wasn't a good call, the last one," Walt said coolly. "The foul should have been on Adams; you had position and he ran into you."

Grateful that the coach had seen that, Keith would have made some comment on the referee, but Dewey gave him no time.

"But both the charging fouls against you were fair," he went on. "That's probably why the third one was called against you too. A fellow figures in a couple of rough-looking fouls and first thing you know the officials start blaming him for everything."

"I wasn't playing it rough —" Keith began, but Dewey checked him.

"I know it, but you picked up three personals in two minutes. You aren't doing the team any good if you foul out in a hurry."

There was no room for argument there, so Keith sat back, fuming. Not at Dewey, but at the officials and Adams too.

That ham actor! he thought.

The pavilion was in unceasing uproar, for Calvert was making a stirring fight of it and the lead was changing hands with almost every basket. Jack Tucker, playing magnificently at center, time and again faked around his taller foe to score or pass off unerringly to set up Stine and Minetti on good shots.

If only we had Michaels, we'd hook 'em sure, Keith thought, forgetting his own discomfiture in the growing excitement of the battle. Mid-State's ripe for the picking.

But the Wolf Pack was having troubles of its own on

defense against the hard-running Bobcats. Neither Hawes nor Grant could check the fast-driving forwards with any consistency. And Tucker, lacking the height of the Mid-State center, could not hold him off the backboard on tip-ins.

The flow of field goals on both sides continued until the half ended, and Calvert, in front at 36-33, trooped off the court to the accompaniment of resounding cheers.

Keith, wishing fervently for another crack at the Bobcats, sat down beside Minetti, sipping carefully at a cup of water.

"They're not so hot, Fran. We ought to pick 'em."

"Yeah, I thought they'd be tougher on defense," the forward admitted. "We could work that crisscross all night. But they're scoring 'em as fast as we do."

He shot Keith a rueful glance.

"You certainly scattered 'em, boy — while you lasted. Too bad you couldn't stick around longer."

Keith squirmed in resentment. Did Minetti think he had been trying to lay out anybody? Why, if he got back in the game, he'd be so careful —

But Dewey paid him no attention, spending most of the intermission crouched among Hawes and Grant and Rourke, tracing movements on the floor. Keith returned to the bench to watch, fretfully at first, but soon with complete absorption as the two teams resumed the high-scoring duel.

The pattern did not vary in the second half. Tucker wheeled into the corner for a sensational jump shot to give Calvert a lead of 5 points, its biggest of the game. But Adams slipped around Grant's guarding to match

the basket immediately. So it went, through the third quarter and into the fourth, with the Wolf Pack clinging to its slender advantage, but never able to lengthen it beyond 2 or 3 points.

Dewey gave Tucker, Minetti, and Stine brief breathing spells, replacing them with sophomores for perhaps a minute at a time. Keith understood the coach's reluctance to risk the regulars' absence for any longer than that, for the Pack's thin margin could vanish in a few seconds.

And as the clock ticked off the remaining minutes of the final quarter, Keith knew that once Calvert lost the lead it had held under such constant pressure, it would never regain it. The effects of that pressure were plainly visible in the strained faces of the tiring first-stringers.

With four minutes left, Calvert led, 59-56. With three and a half remaining it was 59-58, then 60-58 on Tucker's free throw, 61-58 as Minetti did the same. Then Adams went down the side line, cut along the back line, and went up, but the sound of Hawes's hand hacking across the Bobcat's wrists was audible even over the din of the rooting section.

The horn sounded from the bench and the official scorekeeper raised his right hand, thumb and fingers spread wide to signal that it was Hawes's fifth personal foul. Herb came off, head down in dejection, but Dewey met him with a heartening smile and a handshake and the Calvert rooters thundered his name. Keith, rubbing moist palms together, looked expectantly, hopefully, at the coach, but Dewey was helping Tom Rourke out of his blue jacket and Keith sat back

in disappointment.

Adams sighted carefully and sank both free shots, cutting the Pack's advantage to a single point once more, 61-60. Dave Grant dribbled cautiously up court as Mid-State's front rank moved out to start a pressing defense and the red-painted minute hand on the scoreboard clock swung past the two-minute mark.

"Hold it, hold it!" Keith implored silently. Grant got rid of the ball just in time to Tucker, and the big Mid-State center, trying desperately to hook the ball, reached one hand around Jack's neck and fouled him for all to see. The captain took one deep breath at the free throw line and spun the ball through the net for 62-60.

The Bobcats came down court at top speed, Adams spearheading the assault. He swung to the outside of Grant this time and drove, and although the guard stayed with him, Adams fooled him by trying the lay-up underhanded. He got the shot away beneath Dave's outstretched arm and the ball went into the air softly, hung on the lip of the basket, and then fell inward, through the cords.

The groan of the rooting section changed suddenly to a ferocious clamor of rage as the referee, shaking his head vigorously, pointed an accusing finger at Grant to indicate a foul on the attempt. Grant, his face mirroring astonishment and anger, had to be restrained by Stine as he tried to charge toward the official.

With the rest of the bench, Keith had leaped to his feet to join the impulsive outcry against the decision. Suddenly a hand grasped his shoulder, spun him around, and a flushed Walt Dewey said stormily, "Get

in there for Grant — he's through! "

Keith was still peeling out of his jacket as he shouted his name at the scorer. As he took Grant's place along the lane, he glanced hurriedly at his teammates. Mel Stine's shoulders were sagging in weariness and there was a gleam of desperation in Jack Tucker's dark eyes. It would be heartbreaking to lose this game on the free throw which the perspiring Adams was now preparing to try.

But the Bobcat was tired, dead tired. For the first time in the game there was a hitch in his wrist action as he pushed the ball up toward the basket. It did not go in; instead, it rolled off lazily and came down in the grasp of Jack Tucker, who seemed to have expended his last shred of energy in getting that high off the floor. He bent double, as though to catch his breath, before he straightened and tossed the ball to Tom Rourke. It was still 62-62, and Mid-State retreated hastily up the court.

Here we go, Keith thought, jaw set in determination. Rourke dribbled across the center line, looking for an opening, but the Bobcat defense was set tight. Calvert was not going to get any good shots.

Rourke held on. Minetti circled and came out to take the in-bound pass, but his guard was right along with him. Fran flipped the ball back out to Keith, 35 feet away. The Mid-State defender had his arm waving in Keith's face, but he was not staying too close — not that far out.

For an instant Keith was tempted to try the shot. But then he saw Tucker darting out in front of the Mid-State center, hands outstretched. Jack dipped his

left shoulder a trifle, as though he were ready to cut in that direction, and Keith fired a quick chest pass, to lead the captain by a step.

He was horrified to see the ball go sailing into the hands of a Mid-State guard, deep in the corner. Tucker's move to the left had been only a feint. He had shifted his feet, peeled off to the other side instead. The fake had fooled the Bobcat center, but it had also fooled Keith. He caught one malevolent glare from Tucker's eyes as he retreated hurriedly to a defensive position. His throat was scratchy dry and his cheeks burning with confusion. He, Keith Elliott, was the boob in this game.

The Mid-State guard who had so gratefully received the misdirected pass crossed the center line and stopped, looking up at the clock. There were thirty seconds left in which to break the tie.

Keith kept his eyes glued on Adams, pivoting and darting in front of him. But the two Bobcat guards were carefully exchanging passes out beyond the defense, each looking up at the clock as he caught the ball.

Suddenly Keith and the entire pavilion understood the Mid-State strategy. The Bobcats were going to wait until the last possible second before attempting a shot. If it missed, the game would still be tied and forced into an overtime period. But if it were successful, Calvert would not have enough time left to rush the ball down the court.

Back and forth the ball went as the seconds ticked off. Twenty. Fifteen. Ten. Eight, six — and Mid-State moved.

Into the center came the pass and the pivot man

wheeled, with Tucker on his flank, glanced up at the basket, and then flung the ball to Adams, driving diagonally from the side line in the front court.

But Keith had moved too. If it was the last thing he ever did in a Calvert uniform, he was going to stop his man from getting a clear shot.

So he was right in Adams' path as the Bobcat came in, and he went up in the air with him, both arms outstretched to block the shot. Adams crashed into him, and Keith landed off balance, but still on his feet, as he heard the gun crack that ended the game. The shot had failed.

But Adams, knocked down by the collision, lay full length on the hardwood, both hands covering his face as he rolled feebly from side to side as though in pain.

The pavilion was one huge cave of noise. Keith saw one of the referees rushing toward him, pointing first at him and then at the prostrate Bobcat, and felt a cold sickness in his stomach. Not another foul!

Then Adams took his hands away from his face and sat up quickly, his face registering incredulity and anger, with no trace of pain. And Keith realized that the foul had been called, not against him, but on the Bobcat.

"You shoot one, Number 25," the referee said stonily, when he could make himself heard. "Number 10, you were charging."

It required nearly two minutes for both officials to calm down the outraged visitors, including the coach. But there was no appeal from the decision, and eventually the referee who had made it beckoned to Keith and the two of them walked down to the opposite free

throw line. Just the two of them. There were no Bobcats lined up along the lane, since the regular playing time had ended. If Keith sank the free throw, it was Calvert's victory. If he missed, an overtime period would be necessary.

As Keith stepped up to the line, the noise died away as if by magic and a hush fell over the pavilion. Keith had never felt lonelier in his life.

But he remembered then what he had learned as an awkward kid in high school. The coach had said: "The more time you take getting ready to try a free throw, the more time you have to tighten up. Take your sight on the hoop and shoot it — right now."

So Keith stopped thinking, set his feet apart, held the ball lightly with fingers and thumb spread, bent his knees slightly, and let it go. It climbed over the front of the rim and dropped lazily through the netting as Keith's legs suddenly filled with water.

Then the pavilion exploded.

7

The Pack Backs In

IF I had missed that one," Keith said solemnly, "I think I'd have shot myself."

"You could have saved yourself the trouble," Leo Nyland assured him. "I would have shot you, and I would have had to wait in line for the privilege."

Keith looked across the room at Tim Robertson, who was regarding Nyland with amusement.

"Nothing like having loyal friends, is there?" Keith sighed. "Just for that, you can go home, Lion Man."

In truth, he was ready to call it a night. Little more than an hour had elapsed since he had stood at the foul line and seen the ball fall through the cords, but it had been an hour filled with noise and confusion.

Jubilant Calvert rooters had swarmed down from the stands, and the weary but exultant players had difficulty shouldering their way to the dressing room. There it was quieter, but not for long. The sophomores, led by exuberant Tom Rourke and Billy Wilson, burst into a war whoop of victory, and there was a general round of congratulations on all sides.

Keith accepted his with some sheepishness.

"That was a mighty big point, Elliott," Walt Dewey

said, his boyish face flushed with joy, and Keith knew what was implied. He had come very close to losing the game instead of winning it.

Even Jack Tucker gave him a brief acknowledgment.

"Glad you put that one away," he said as he passed Keith coming out of the shower.

Still, deserved or not, the victory was the Wolf Pack's first over Mid-State in three seasons and left them undefeated, as Nyland pointed out vociferously.

"I tell you, Keith, all the basketball team needed was a big, stupid football player, like you. Now they've got it made."

"Many thanks. Now go home."

"O. K., I will." Leo was not abashed. He started for the door, then stopped, his round face brightening.

"Almost forgot. I ran into your lady friend tonight coming out of the gym. Made her back off too. She's not so tough."

"What lady friend?"

"How many do you have, you undercover Romeo?" Nyland demanded. "The one from Harlow's. You know, Tucker's cousin."

Apprehension leaped to Keith's features.

"Just what did you say to her, Leo?" he asked nervously.

"Oh, nothing much. Just pointed out that you'd won the game for us, that's all, and that she certainly owed you an apology for the way she tore into you that night."

"Oh, no!" It was almost a groan, wrenched from a despairing Keith.

"Why not?" Leo was obviously puzzled. "She was

a good sport about it. Said she'd apologize when the time came. That's fair enough, isn't it? "

He seemed a little miffed at the agonized look that had come over Keith.

"I thought I was doing you a favor," he said huffily, as he opened the door.

"I appreciate it, Leo." Keith forced a grateful note into his voice. He would not have offended Nyland for the world. "Guess I'm just beat up. See you tomorrow."

"So long, Lion." Robertson, fighting laughter, composed himself long enough to hurl a hasty farewell, but when the sound of Nyland's footsteps had died away, Tim began to sputter with mirth.

"I wish I'd heard that!" he gasped. "Nyland fixing you up with that girl. She's not so tough, he says." Tim went off in another burst of merriment.

Keith sighed wearily. The vision of Cathie Stone "apologizing" was one he did not care to contemplate at that moment.

The dramatic victory over Mid-State produced a noticeable reaction on the campus. George Steele, encountering Keith next morning, offered jocular congratulations, then said, with a trace of belligerence, "I guess the team showed it wasn't going to fold up as soon as the pressure was applied, didn't it?"

That was a jab at Tim Robertson, Keith realized uneasily.

"No, they hung in there pretty well, George. Might do all right."

"You bet," the other grunted. "No quitters in that crowd."

The changed attitude among the players was evident

too as the Pack prepared to meet Sequoia. It was not so much forthright confidence as it was a lessening of the uncertainty about themselves.

"Buddy Barnett is the key man in their whole offense," Fran Minetti said doggedly. "If you stop him, you stop Sequoia. Remember last season?"

The regulars, including Keith, were resting on the side lines while Walt Dewey occupied himself with the second unit.

"It's not the same team, Fran." Tucker's expression, as usual, was one of deadly seriousness. "Those two new forwards are big, and you notice they've been averaging around 15 points a game."

"Well, I still say we've got to handle Barnett." Fran looked over at Keith and smiled. "That's for you, Mr. Elliott. You worried?"

"Not unless he has three hands," Keith said cheerfully. He had been somewhat flattered when Dewey had informed him that Barnett was to be his man. But he was a little apprehensive too. He'd seen the Sequoia center in action — big, rough, and agile. That was why the coach was assigning him to the job, rather than the taller but not so husky Tucker. Someone, Keith knew, was going to be bruised.

In that assumption he proved to be correct. But when the time came to face Sequoia, he was in no frame of mind to play any sort of game, for he was cold, fighting mad. And not at Barnett.

It was Catherine Stone's fault. Keith had been too busy to think very much about Leo Nyland's ill-advised talk with her. When he did, he thought briefly of buying the Lion Man a muzzle.

It was just bad luck that he should encounter the girl again less than an hour before the Sequoia game. From Bannerman Hall to the pavilion was only a few hundred yards, and he was striding along one of the narrow paths, going over in his mind for perhaps the twentieth time that day how he would guard Buddy Barnett, when he overtook her.

She was walking toward the pavilion too. At the sound of footsteps behind her, she turned her head just at the moment that Keith came into the circle of light cast by an overhanging lamp.

Recognition was mutual. Startled in spite of himself, Keith would have hurried on past her, but the girl spoke.

"Good evening, Mr. Elliott," she said in clear, ringing tones. Uneasy at once, he slowed his pace and mumbled a wary hello.

"I've been told I owe you an apology." Keith wished he had Leo Nyland in his hands at that moment.

"No, not at all — I didn't say anything like that," he murmured, anxious to get away, but still striving to preserve a semblance of courtesy.

"Oh, I'm quite willing to apologize," the girl said brightly. "I didn't think you would make the varsity, and you have, haven't you?"

Relief and astonishment mingled in him. The girl was being a good sport about it, after all.

Then she said coolly, "Of course, it was a little easier once you'd made sure Floyd Michaels wouldn't play, wasn't it?"

Words choked in his throat and his fists clenched involuntarily.

"I know where you got that information!" he grated, his eyes blazing. "Well, you can tell your precious cousin that he's wrong, as usual."

The violence of his manner jarred her and brought a fleeting look of uncertainty to her dark brown eyes. Keith did not see it, for he had spun on his heel and was hurrying on to the gym, his features set in angry lines. He was going to call Jack Tucker on this one, and quickly.

But when he stormed into the dressing room, the captain was huddled in a corner with Walt Dewey, listening attentively. He could not break into that conference, so he began to dress, his quick, jerky movements betraying his inner agitation.

He kept glancing in Tucker's direction, prepared to dart for him as soon as the opportunity presented itself. He had tolerated Jack's constant disapproval, his barely concealed animosity, because he understood and, in a way, could even sympathize with the captain's feelings after the *Wolf Cry* editorial, for which he, Keith, had been responsible. But the implication that he had helped get rid of Michaels to further his own success on the team was too much. Tucker was going to eat that accusation, if it put both of them in the hospital.

But when Dewey at last gave Jack a quick clap on the shoulder and turned away, he came directly to Keith, and for the next few minutes Keith listened to the coach quietly review the way to guard Buddy Barnett.

"Remember, play in front of him. Make the guards hurry their pass in to the post. He can't make that hook shot if he doesn't get the ball."

Keith nodded, glowering. He had been told all this

before, and his mind was occupied with Jack Tucker.

"And Elliott —" Dewey's voice held a faint edge, as though he sensed he had not been given his listener's undivided attention. "Don't get careless about fouls."

"Sure, Coach." He'd try not to kill anybody, he growled to himself. There was no help for it — Tucker would have to wait, for the Wolf Pack was going out on the court.

They got a ringing ovation. Every seat in the pavilion was filled, and those unable to find a seat were standing above the last row of seats or crouched in the aisles. Even the traditional Superior game hadn't produced that kind of crowd, in Keith's memory. He wondered sourly how many would turn out for the next game if Calvert lost this one.

Barnett was a tall, raw-boned youth, long-armed and angular. He seemed to tower over Tucker as they stepped into the center circle. The Sequoia forwards were rangy lads too, Keith noted. This would take some doing.

Barnett controlled the opening jump, but Herb Hawes leaped in quickly to snatch the ball and dribble rapidly down the side line. As he slanted in toward the basket, he flipped the ball deftly to Tucker in the corner and Jack arched a perfect two-pointer with a graceful one-hand shot.

"Neat," Keith conceded, grudgingly. Sequoia sprang to the attack, Barnett ambling into the free throw lane and wheeling to receive a pass. Keith edged around to get in front of him and felt an elbow in the ribs, hard, as he did so. Then the center's knee came up quickly

and jammed against his thigh.

All this passed in a few seconds, unnoticed by either official.

This is going to be real fun, Keith thought grimly. Barnett knew all the tricks of playing a post position, legal and otherwise. Sometimes the referees overlooked some of the jostling between two men jockeying for position, so long as neither had the ball. If they were inclined to let those things go tonight, that suited Keith fine. He was in a proper mood for a roughhouse, should Buddy want to play it that way.

The play swung away from Barnett, and a Sequoia forward missed an overhead shot. Hawes recovered, snapped the ball to Stine, and Mel went rolling all the way to score on a fast break. The Foresters came down slowly, fed the ball to Barnett. Keith leaped in front, batted the ball away into Tucker's hands.

As Barnett loped back to a defensive position, Keith could hear him complain to the nearest official about being fouled, but the man in the striped shirt seemed not to hear.

Minetti tried to drive, was checked, and passed out to Hawes, who made a feint, then slid to his right, and lofted a 25-footer over the upraised arms of the green-jerseyed Forester guarding him. Sequoia signaled for a time out.

Barely able to hear one another over the roar from the stands, the Wolf Pack huddled near the center line. The astonishment at the ease with which they had taken a 6-0 lead showed in their faces.

"Let's pour it to 'em," Stine exclaimed eagerly, but Tucker raised a cautioning hand.

“ Long way to go yet, Mel.”

Keith kept silent. He was thinking what he would say to the captain when he got him alone, after the game.

But even that was driven from his thoughts when play resumed. He was forced to give all his attention to Barnett, in self-protection. The Forester center was making use of every trick he knew, and they were many, as Keith very soon learned.

Following orders, he circled and darted in front of Barnett to shut off the in-bound pass. If he played behind Buddy and let him take the ball on the post, it would have been difficult indeed to hold him. With his long arms and agility, Barnett could pivot either way and throw up a hook shot almost impossible for a smaller man to block.

So Keith kept on the move, trying always to get his arm or shoulder out in front of Barnett. Of course, such tactics were risky, since they invited a high pass to Buddy, over Keith's head and behind him. But a high pass took longer, was easier to intercept, and gave the other Calvert defenders time to help out if Barnett did get away in back of Keith.

This was not accomplished without considerable bodily contact, as Keith and the center fought for a favorable position around the free throw line. Elbows, hips, and shoulders collided, but only twice was Keith called for personal fouls. Barnett was not caught at all, although Keith knew he would be wearing bruises from Buddy's elbows tomorrow.

Still, it was the Forester who gave way first, as he began to complain constantly to the officials.

“ Watch that guy, he's giving me the knee, Ref,” he

panted after Keith had swung around him to break up another pass. Soon the Sequoia substitutes took up the chorus of grievance against Keith, the players jumping up off the bench and pointing angrily at him each time he and Barnett came together.

But the officials seemed to be paying no heed to the loud objections and Keith began to take grim amusement in them. He did not acknowledge either Barnett's angry grimaces or his verbal barbs, delivered under his breath. The center was having his troubles and so was Sequoia.

Jack Tucker was playing brilliantly, hounding the ball all over the court, shooting accurately from the corners and feeding expertly to Minetti and Stine. And though the big Sequoia forwards smashed fiercely for rebounds, the Wolf Pack not only held its quickly acquired lead, but increased it to 31-18 at the end of the first half. They left the floor with the frantic roar from the rooters ringing in their ears.

"How do you feel, boy?" Stine asked, eyes alight. "Can you go another half with that big baboon?"

"Why not?" Keith answered abruptly. His eyes sought Tucker. The captain's dark head was visible in the corner.

That's my pigeon, he thought. Barnett was no more than an annoyance.

Walt Dewey came up to him, smiling.

"Good job on Buddy, Elliott. You've got him really off stride. Do those Sequoia bench jockeys bother you?"

"I don't even hear them, Coach."

It was tougher when the Pack returned to the floor. Sequoia began to concentrate on Tucker, letting Stine

go relatively unguarded, on the theory that Jack was by far the more dangerous of the two. The Forester forwards began to shoot more from outside instead of trying to feed Barnett.

Gradually, almost imperceptibly, the tension increased. Sequoia scored 5 points before Fran Minetti hooked one from the side. Stine fumbled a pass and Sequoia recovered, launching a fast break with two men coming down the court against Keith, the lone defender.

He made a feint at the first one, hoping to force a pass which he might intercept, but the Forester was not fooled. He went driving right on through for the lay-in. Keith retrieved the ball with a feeling of absolute helplessness, although he knew it was not his fault. A guard had to be lucky to break up a two-on-one attack.

"Steady does it, Herb," he growled at Hawes. "Let's settle down."

But Tucker, who had been deadly on free throws, missed two after being fouled and then Minetti unaccountably tried a long and difficult shot which went completely over the backboard. Calvert had lost its "touch," the feeling that it had control of the game. Tucker signaled for a time out and the players, panting, dropped to the floor.

"Come on, let's stop this nonsense." The captain's voice shook a little. "We're going to blow this game if we don't buckle down and play basketball."

No one spoke.

"What the dickens were you doing, Fran, throwing that one from a hundred feet away?" Jack demanded.

Minetti, tracing a design on the floor with his finger, twitched his shoulders.

"I dunno," he muttered, without looking up. "Got a little optimistic, I guess."

Did Tucker think he was doing any good with that attitude, Keith wondered scornfully. Reassurance was what Minetti needed, not criticism, at that moment.

The whistle blew and as Keith got to his feet, he remarked: "We've still got 6 points on these jokers. No need to get panicky." He sounded confident, but he was not. Six points was not very much, with Calvert obviously rattled and Sequoia fully aware that it had the Pack on the run.

Barnett began to get a little more reckless with his elbows and hands and once Keith almost had the wind driven out of him. No one saw it and for an instant he boiled.

"Once more on that and I'll put a knee right through you!" he grated. Barnett grinned wickedly and Keith quickly cooled off. He realized the Forester would like nothing better than to have a guard try to fight him instead of playing him.

So he stuck doggedly to his task of keeping Buddy from getting in position for the hook shot and Calvert seemed to shake off some of its jitters. The Pack did not regain its smooth first-half brilliance, but Sequoia had missed its golden chance. The Foresters stayed within striking distance, but the clock ticked on, into the fourth quarter, and still they could not pull even.

With five minutes left, Calvert was still in front, 52-48. Sequoia, aware that time was running out on

it, began to press the Pack all over the court, picking up the guards as soon as one came into possession of the ball.

Hawes lost the ball under his own basket, but Keith leaped in to force a jump. The strain was beginning to tell on the Pack; if Sequoia scored now, he felt the Foresters could run away with it.

But it was Calvert who scored first, as Stine broke away from his overeager guard. Sequoia threw caution away, began to press with the desperation of defeat. Four minutes. Three minutes, and the scoreboard showed Calvert 55, Sequoia 50.

Suddenly Barnett moved out of the keyhole toward the side line and Keith trailed him. As the Sequoia guard snapped the ball in Buddy's direction, Keith leaped forward, trying to intercept.

He had to reach high, and he was aware that he was very close to the side line in front of the Sequoia bench. He got his hands on the ball, but he was teetering on his toes, trying to stay in bounds. He could only bat the ball toward the middle of the floor before he lost his balance and half stumbled, half fell, backward into the row of seats holding the Forester substitutes.

He did not fall hard, and the impact was cushioned by the hands of the players who rose to fend him off for their own protection. This steadied him and he regained his balance, but as he did so, someone brought the heel of one hand forcibly against Keith's neck, knocking his head forward.

It hurt. He reacted instinctively, all his pent-up resentment exploding at the unprovoked blow. He

swung one arm backward, rigid, with the fist clenched, and heard a gasping "Oof!" as it thumped on somebody's ribs.

Fighting mad, he whirled around and in an instant became the center of a shoving, jostling knot of green-shirted Foresters, each of them, from the look on his face, ready and eager to do him physical damage.

From the Calvert bench at the other end of the floor the Wolf Pack rushed to join the impending melee. Keith was hazily aware that up in the stands the rooters had come to their feet with a sound both ominous and menacing.

In the midst of his anger, Keith sensed that one blow struck might touch off an ugly riot. He dropped both hands to his sides and took a step backward just as the Calvert coach, red-faced, rammed his way into the middle of the group.

"Get back there, all of you!" he shouted angrily at his players, his body forming a shield between them and Keith.

Then the two officials were at Keith's side and a scowling Walt Dewey was shepherding Calvert players back to their own bench. The referees were talking in a calm and reassuring manner and the menacing throaty sound of the rooters died away.

All of a sudden Keith felt a little shaky. A hand grasped his arm and he turned to confront a troubled Walt Dewey.

"Come on, take a rest." The coach gave a quick jerk of his head toward the Wolf Pack bench.

"One of those jokers deliberately hit me in the head," Keith said bitterly, ashamed of losing his tem-

per but seeking some justification for it.

"I know, I saw it. Sit down anyway."

Keith sat down, scorching. Tom Rourke whispered, "Don't you worry, Elliott; those guys have been asking for trouble."

Keith gave him a grateful look. He was just beginning to realize how near he had come to starting something that might have been really unpleasant. It frightened him a little.

Play did not resume at once, for the officials had summoned the two coaches to the center of the court, along with the captains, Tucker and Barnett. It was a brief conference, but the captains shook hands in perfunctory fashion as it broke up. Keith could guess what the referees had talked about — undoubtedly a warning to keep the players under control or face a possible forfeit of the game.

There were two and a half minutes left. That was time enough to lose half a dozen games. Sequoia took the ball out of bounds. They were working fast, but taking no reckless chances. They wanted only the good shot, and they got it in thirty seconds as their two tall forwards whirled into position, shoulder to shoulder at the foul line, to form a double screen. Behind them, Barnett set himself and sank the field goal for 55-52.

"Don't choke now!" Keith pleaded under his breath. His own turmoil of a moment earlier was forgotten in the tenseness of the action on the court.

Sequoia maintained its full-court press and Mel Stine, dribbling furiously, just did escape his guard in time to bring the ball across the center line inside the ten-second limit. Calvert began to stall now, passing the

ball back and forth at mid-court, or dribbling into the corners and then shooting it back out again.

But the regulars were tired. Minetti was first to falter under the Foresters' frenzied pressure. Forced almost out of bounds by relentless guarding, Fran hurried his pass and it was deflected by a green-jerseyed defender. Sequoia recovered and Barnett swung out of the keyhole for the deep hook shot that cut Calvert's margin to 55-54 with twenty-five seconds left.

Keith hunched forward on the bench, his throat dry, his nails digging into his palms.

"Hang on, hang on!" he screamed, but he could barely hear his own words in the constant roar of the crowd. Dave Grant took the in-bound pass from Hawes, flipped to Tucker, and Jack drove across the center stripe as the seconds ticked away.

The captain wheeled, pivoted, and passed to Stine. Mel tried to drive down the side lines, was pinned as two Foresters closed on him, and got rid of the ball as best he could. Minetti and Barnett leaped for it, but it was the Sequoia center who came up with it at mid-court.

The timer brought the horn to his lips as Barnett flung the ball to a Sequoia forward speeding down the side line with Grant cutting across to meet him. Fifteen feet from the basket the Forester forward stopped short and, with the entire Sequoia bench yelling frantically, "Shoot! Shoot!" he fired a hasty two-hand chest shot. The ball hit the side of the rim and fell harmlessly to the floor as the blast of the final horn cut through the sound of human throats.

By a single point, the Wolf Pack had lasted.

Keith, holding his breath in agonized apprehension as the Forester unloosed that last despairing shot, let it out with a whoop and raced out on the floor with the rest of the squad. He pounded Minetti on the back deliriously, forgetting everything in his joy of victory. Fran's olive features were pale with strain, and there was a dazed look in his eyes. He managed a wan smile.

"We sort of backed into that one, didn't we?" he gasped.

Later, as the first flush of exultation began to subside, Keith reflected that Minetti had phrased it just about right, whether or not he had meant to. Calvert had backed into victory, all right. It wasn't so much that the Pack had won the game as that they had failed to lose it. It was a distinction that did not show in the box score, which would not reveal how the Pack had gone to pieces under Sequoia's full-court press in the final two minutes.

Now that it was over, Keith's fury at Jack Tucker came back with a rush. He came out of the shower and began to dress hurriedly. Jack was not going to get away from him now. He could see him in a corner of the dressing room, in the midst of a group that included an older man whom Keith recognized as Charlie Trimble, veteran sports editor of the local paper, the *Woodland Mail*.

Probably explaining to Charlie how easy it was, Keith thought scornfully.

He was combing his hair and about to leave, ready to intercept Tucker outside the pavilion, when Glenn Nixon sauntered over to his locker. The graduate manager's chubby features wore an expression of amiabil-

ity, but Keith sensed something not quite so amiable beneath it. He could guess what that might be.

"Nice game, Elliott," Nixon offered. Then, with a querulous tone, he added: "Say, I've been meaning to ask you about that queer crack you made to Jim Madison up at Canyon City. What was the idea?"

Impatience dug at Keith's nerves. Over Nixon's shoulder he could see Tucker standing by the door, ready to depart. He didn't want any argument with Glenn, particularly at this moment.

"Idea?" He tried to sound polite. "He asked me a question and I gave him an answer."

"It certainly wasn't a satisfactory one," the graduate manager said testily. "Don't you realize who Madison is? what his support means to Calvert?"

Tucker waved farewell to someone and went out the door. Keith made a little grimace of frustration. Blast Glorious Glenn, anyway!

Nixon mistook his exasperated silence for hesitancy.

"You may not be aware of it, Elliott, but Madison is thinking of giving us a new gym. He was a little curious about your attitude that night, particularly after that fool editorial in the *Wolf Cry*.

"Now, lad," Nixon's voice took on a confidential, conciliatory note, "for goodness' sake, if by any chance you run into him again, give him a reasonable answer, will you? Promise me that?"

Keith's vexation spilled over. Tucker was out of reach now and he found the graduate manager's manner irritating enough by itself.

"I won't promise anything except to give him a straight answer," he blurted. "If he doesn't think Cal-

vert's team deserves a new gym, that's his business, not mine."

He brushed past Nixon, who stared at him as though he had not heard aright, and moved quickly toward the door. He might still overtake Tucker.

But the captain was not in sight and Keith slowed his pace in disappointment. He would catch up with Tucker, though — tomorrow, or the next day. It seemed the captain was more interested in discrediting him than in acknowledging Keith's help to the team so far.

The man's been wrong and he won't admit it, Keith thought hotly as he trudged toward the dormitory.

It did not occur to him that he was deeply concerned with proving himself right.

8

A Night with Whitey

EFFECTIVE guarding of Barnett by Calvert's Rough, tough Keith Elliott had a lot to do with slowing down the Sequoia attack. Elliott went out with two minutes remaining after trying to take on the entire Forester bench during a mix-up on the side lines. No blows were struck, but Calvert's big All-Conference tackle looked ready and willing."

Keith laid down the paper with a disturbed look in his gray eyes.

"Did you read Charlie Trimble's story in the *Woodland Mail*?" he asked. Tim Robertson, sitting across the table from him in the school cafeteria, glanced up from his own paper, the *Wolf Cry*.

"Yes, I read it. Don't you like it?"

"What does he mean calling me rough and tough? Sounds as though I were trying to cripple somebody. Furthermore, this paragraph here makes it look as though I was thrown out of the game, and I wasn't."

Robertson grinned.

"Well, I see what you mean. But you weren't exactly playing patty-cake with Barnett. Not rough, maybe, but rugged, anyway."

"Of course it was rugged," Keith said. "He gave

me the business out there. I didn't want to get killed, so I protected myself."

"O. K., O. K.," Robertson said soothingly. "I don't see why you mind. I wish someone would describe me as rough and tough. I'd love it."

But Keith's disquiet remained; in fact, it increased when Leo Nyland offered congratulations in the same vein.

"It did my heart good to see you manhandle that big donkey Barnett," he said gleefully. "And I was right there ready to bust somebody on the sneezer when you banged those boys on the bench. That'll teach 'em Calvert can play rough too."

"Look, Leo, I didn't try to manhandle anyone, and I certainly wasn't playing rough. Cut it out, will you?"

Nyland looked perplexed.

"That was no tea dance I saw last night, brother. And you were right in the middle of everything."

Keith saw there was no use reasoning with the Lion Man, because Leo was partly right — he had been in the middle of everything. But his fast-blooming reputation for roughness upset him, even though it seemed to evoke admiration rather than reproof. At least, from characters like Nyland.

He took consolation, though, in the lack of any comment from Walt Dewey on that particular subject. He felt that the coach would have wasted no time letting one of his players know about rough stuff. But Dewey knew how it had happened.

Walt had only quiet praise for his men, coupled with a half-humorous warning not to let success go to their heads.

"I realize all of you are probably thinking about Superior. But don't forget Central this week end. One game at a time, fellows."

For years Central and Calvert had been the Conference door mats, fighting it out with each other to escape the indignity of finishing last. This season Central appeared no stronger than usual.

Monday's practice was brief, only the sophomores getting any real workout. Keith was thankful now that he had not succeeded in confronting Jack Tucker immediately after the Sequoia game. Undoubtedly he would have said something he might have regretted — might even have come to blows. The captain's aloof but ever-present hostility wore on his nerves.

At the moment, however, Keith was in the mood to deal with Tucker firmly, but without heat. He loitered near his own locker until he saw Jack prepared to depart, and caught up with him in the hallway.

"Hold it a minute, Jack."

Tucker stopped and swiveled around to face him, dark eyes questioning but his face expressionless.

"Yes?"

"Just one thing. Get rid of the idea that I reported Michaels for that ruckus at Bannerman. I don't mind admitting I would have done it, but someone else beat me to it. I never mentioned it until after Floyd was suspended."

A look that might have meant bewilderment passed over Tucker's face for an instant. Then his lips twitched in a half-smile.

"Really?" he asked, as though nothing interested him less. "I wasn't aware anyone said you had."

He wheeled and walked on, leaving Keith flat-footed in confusion.

Embarrassment overwhelmed him as he tried to marshal his thoughts. Jack was speaking the truth, he was sure. It would not be in character for the captain to deny deliberately something he knew to be true.

But if Tucker had not spread the report that Keith had turned in Floyd Michaels, who had? Someone, surely. That rumor could not have been dreamed up by Cathie Stone alone.

The very thought of the girl put Keith in an even blacker frame of mind. If the busybody cousin of Tucker's had not been listening that night at Harlow's, Keith would not have been forced into trying for the team. He wouldn't have been caught in the middle between Glenn Nixon and James Madison and his possible connection with the suspension of Floyd Michaels would never have been raised. He would now be enjoying a relaxed, carefree winter, remembered as Keith Elliott, the former All-Conference tackle, instead of Keith Elliott, rough, tough troublemaker.

"Why don't girls go to girls' colleges, where they belong?" he growled to himself.

Nor was his disposition improved by Tim Robertson's conversation that evening.

"Say, you ought to read my mail today," the editor said. He sounded somewhat amused, but somewhat concerned too. "About twenty letters demanding that the *Wolf Cry* print an apology to the basketball team."

"Well?"

Robertson blinked at Keith's brusque manner.

"I thought I'd ask you," he said, frowning slightly.

"Have to admit the Pack is still unbeaten, and it did win two close ones in a row. Looks like we may have been mistaken calling them a choke outfit that couldn't stand pressure."

"You're the editor. Write anything you please."

Tim's face reddened. He took off his glasses and began to polish them slowly with a handkerchief.

"No point in being touchy with me, chum," he remarked quietly. "I'm not trying to pin any responsibility on you. But since I got the idea from you originally, I thought I'd ask you for a second opinion. If you'd rather not say, that's all right too. I can make my own judgments."

Keith was contrite at once. He had started the whole thing.

"I'm sorry, Tim. I seem to be barking at everyone these days."

Robertson dismissed it with a gesture and Keith said: "I still haven't changed my mind, though. We just did stagger through those last two games. If either had lasted another two minutes, I think we would have blown it. I want to see how the Pack plays when it has to come from behind," he added. "Particularly when we're playing somewhere besides our own cracker box. That will be the tell."

Robertson nodded understandingly, but his eyes were thoughtful. He gave a little shrug.

"All right, I'll go with that. No apologies in the *Wolf Cry* — yet."

Calvert beat Central handily. Keith could sense that one as the Pack came out on the court, even though the rooting section was massed against it. This was a

team Calvert knew it could beat, and that careless confidence was reflected in the Pack's loose, relaxed attitude during the warm-up.

It proved justified. Central sprang a zone defense, but Walt Dewey had guessed that the Engineers might do exactly that, and Calvert was ready for it. The first time the Pack gained possession, Keith came down with the ball just outside the zone. He fidgeted briefly on his pivot foot, looking for an open man, then stepped back and pushed off with a one-hand shot. The ball bounced off the back of the ring, straight up in the air, then fell back down through the cords.

Keith could not restrain a sheepish grin as he retreated. That was a real "bleeder," a lucky one. Then Stine intercepted, broke the zone with a quick feeding pass to Minetti cutting across the middle, and Fran turned deftly to lay it up for another field goal.

That made it 4-0 and Central never recovered. The Engineers were badly off in their shooting from the start, and before the first period was over Calvert was pulling away steadily. When the Pack lead had mounted to 32-11, Dewey pulled out all the starters and kept them out. The sophomores and juniors went the rest of the way, more than holding their own with the dispirited Central regulars, and the final count was a lopsided 65-41.

The bus ride back to the campus was a noisy one, with the substitutes making most of the racket. The irrepressible Tom Rourke leered at Mel Stine as he said: "Hope you noticed there was none of this one-point stuff tonight. Just put the supervarsity in there and you older fellows can sit back and relax."

"O. K., O. K.," Stine conceded with lazy good humor. "If we played Central every night, you'd all be first string."

"There's considerable difference between Central and Superior, sonny boy," Herb Hawes drawled.

"Phooey!" Rourke's freckled features wrinkled impishly. "They can only play five men at a time and they have to shoot at the same-sized basket we do. Superior may scare you, Herb; it doesn't scare me."

Hawes bridled visibly and Jack Tucker snapped: "No one's frightened by Superior, Tom. But don't sound off on subjects you don't know anything about. Superior is a lot better team than Central, and even you ought to realize it."

Keith grinned inwardly. Rourke's flip remarks had flicked the veterans on a raw spot, although Tom was now a little taken aback at the sharp reaction to his jest. Mel Stine cleared the air quickly.

"Hey, Keith," he said jovially, "you didn't knock anyone down tonight. Are you losing your grip?"

This produced laughter in which Keith had to join. He recognized Mel's strategy in diverting the conversation to another channel, but he was a little touchy on the subject of rough play. Just as touchy as Tucker. The captain had come up as though jabbed with a needle when Rourke started kidding. Calvert was unbeaten all right, but Keith didn't think there was a man on the squad confident that the Pack would beat Superior next week. And that included Walt Dewey, he'd wager.

Yet there seemed no lack of optimism among the Calvert student body. Perhaps it was more hope than

conviction the Pack could whip Superior, but all week long the campus boiled with basketball talk.

"Never seen anything like it," Robertson confessed. "We've got twice as many students as there are seats in the pavilion, and everyone wants to go. Maybe we need a new gym from Mr. Madison after all."

"Once in a lifetime, Tim," Keith said. "If we lose Saturday, there'll be room to spare for the next game."

His roommate gave him a quizzical look. "You don't sound very optimistic."

"I'm not, frankly. Hopeful, yes — optimistic, no."

Keith meant it, but he did not explain why. He knew he would have the job of guarding Whitey Scales.

Walt Dewey had taken him aside Monday.

"Elliott, I'm going to put you on Scales," he said. "I'm not trying to butter you up by saying you're our best defensive guard. You showed that against Sequoia. But I won't try to fool you, either. I know Whitey is harder to handle than Barnett. He can do more things and he's a lot faster."

Keith was a little puzzled. Was the coach trying to scare him?

"I don't expect anyone to stop Scales altogether," Dewey went on earnestly. "I don't know if it can be done. But if we can keep him from running wild, keep him from one of those 30-point nights, we've got a good chance. I think we can outscore their other four men by enough to win. How about it? Want to give it a try?"

To Keith, it was as though the lights had suddenly been flicked on in a darkened room. There was no longer any doubt that Walt Dewey was fully aware of

his share in the *Wolf Cry* editorial, or that the coach had forgotten a single word of it. He was going to saddle Keith with the task of guarding the best player in the Conference. If Calvert was going to "choke," as the *Wolf Cry* had all but predicted, this would be the game. But it would be his responsibility, since the Superior captain was the key to the outcome.

There was a neat ironic twist to this, Keith thought. But in Dewey's youthful features he could find nothing beyond an honest interest in his answer.

"Why, naturally I'll try it," he said. Did the coach think that he was going to "choke"?

Nevertheless, he had a difficult time keeping the Tiger ace out of his thoughts as the week wore on and the excitement mounted on the campus. Not within memory of any student had Calvert been in the running for the Conference championship, let alone undefeated, this far into the season. The very idea that the Pack, the long-time door mat, had a chance for the title was electrifying to the undergraduates.

Keith had not thought much about Barnett before the Mid-State game. He was not a worrier by nature, and he was accustomed to taking assignments as they came. But Whitey Scales presented a different problem, particularly since everyone assumed that Calvert's chances were bound up with Scales and how effectively he could be bottled up.

It did not ease Keith's mind to have this pointed out in the sports pages. Charlie Trimble, writing in the *Mail*, commented:

"The surprising Calvert Wolf Pack and the Superior Tigers, both unbeaten, collide Saturday night in

Calvert Pavilion, and the outcome will depend on how well the Scales are balanced, to make a bum joke.

"If Calvert can hold the phenomenal Whitey Scales under 20 points, the Pack can win, for in Jack Tucker it has a scoring threat almost the equal of the Superior captain.

"Coach Walt Dewey will undoubtedly give the unenviable task of guarding Scales to Keith Elliott, the broad-shouldered footballer who has proved such a sturdy defender in earlier games. Elliott's hard-nosed style of play has been effective on the backboard, particularly against big, slow teams like Sequoia. How it will work against the clever, speedy Tigers is the question."

Everywhere he turned that week, it seemed to Keith, the specter of Whitey Scales confronted him. Leo Nyland, George Steele, Pete Mead — nearly everyone who talked to him — swung the conversation to the game.

"Let's see you cut Whitey down to size," was the general tenor of their remarks, spoken with a confidence in which Keith did not share. There was not a great deal he could do to prepare for Saturday night. The Pack worked only briefly against Superior play patterns, but long and hard on its own defense. A coach could construct a fine theoretical defense and see it shattered on the court by a foe of unusual ability — like Scales.

An hour before game time hundreds of Calvert students were milling around before the entrance to the gym. These were the disappointed ones, unable to buy tickets but hopeful that they might be allowed to stand

up somewhere inside. Keith had to ease his way through the crowd, and from all sides heard heartening shouts from those who recognized him.

"Go get 'em, Elliott! Bust 'em good! Yea, Keith, skin those Tigers."

He ducked his head in embarrassed acknowledgment. He wished he were outside and unable to get in. Then he wouldn't have to face Whitey Scales.

But he shook off that feeling angrily. Whether he succeeded or failed, he wasn't going to "die" in the dressing room.

There was nothing frightening about the Tiger captain's appearance. Keith had never seen him at close range until the two teams took their places on the court for the opening tip-off. He took up a position alongside Scales, who turned and looked at him impassively as they shook hands in the traditional gesture. Keith saw that Whitey's eyes, under the eyebrows so blond as to be almost invisible, were a light, chill blue. Scales was nearly a head shorter than Keith, compactly built, but not unusually muscular.

Figuratively speaking, that perfunctory handshake was as close to his opponent as Keith could get that night. He knew in the first sixty seconds of play that all his uneasiness about Scales had been justified.

It took half that time for Calvert to score, as Hawes leaped high to get Tucker's tip-off and passed quickly to Stine down court. The Pack worked deliberately to set up a good shot, and got it as Tucker slid behind Minetti's screen and pushed a left-hander through on the run.

The triumphant yell from the stands made Keith's

ears ring, but he kept his eyes on Scales as he retreated cautiously, ready to move when the Tiger forward made his break.

Scales ambled lazily down the side line, turned on the speed suddenly and cut diagonally across the court as he took the pass from the guard. Keith went with him as he drove to the left forecourt, not too close, but poised to move in or float back to stop a dribbling rush toward the basket.

Whitey came at him, stopped, the ball held loosely at chest level. Keith saw his knees bend, his shoulder muscles gather. He timed his own leap to block the shot that was coming.

The ball went up, but only as far as the length of Whitey's arm. He held it there, drew it back quickly as Keith jumped, and waited. As Keith's feet hit the floor again, Scales leaped lightly off his left foot and shot. He followed it with his eyes for an instant and then started backing up.

Keith did not have to look behind him to know that the basket had been made. The feint to shoot had been so easy, so natural, that it left him bewildered. It was like riding in an elevator and watching your quarry pass in another elevator, beyond reach and traveling in the opposite direction.

Mel Stine was fouled and sank the free throw to make it 3-2. It was the last time Calvert was in the lead. The Superior center fired long and Scales somehow reached up and under Keith's grab off the backboard to tap it in.

Tucker missed. Scales came across the center line in the same manner as before, feinting a shot from

almost the identical spot on the court. Keith did not react to the fake, and Scales raised his arms again and sighted carefully. This time Keith moved close, both arms outthrust to block the shot, but not leaving his feet. Without a break in rhythm, Scales brought the ball down, whipped a one-hand bounce pass just outside Keith's leg and cut swiftly to his right for the return pass. As Keith wheeled to follow him, he found himself screened off by another Tiger directly in his path and Scales was lofting an easy one from near the free throw line.

Herb Hawes shook his head in a sympathetic gesture. Hawes knew what it was like. He had guarded Whitey last year.

But what Keith needed, he thought with increasing helplessness, was not so much sympathy as an extra pair of hands. He tried to crowd Scales a little, twice drew personal fouls as Whitey repeated the "give and go" maneuver — the quick pass into the middle and the cut behind it for the return pass and short shot.

Trying to avoid the fouls for blocking, Keith dropped off his man a step, but Whitey made his head spin. He'd fake a dribble and shoot, fake a shot and drive, fake a dribble, step back, and shoot. And Keith was always a split second behind him on every move, never sure enough to commit himself in time.

It was all the more humiliating because he was aware that the Pack was playing good ball — except for himself. Tucker and Stine several times brought the stands up roaring with spectacular shots. And it seemed to Keith that the other Tigers were not scoring many baskets.

Yet by the end of the first quarter, Superior had built up a 23-14 advantage. Winded by his futile chasing of Scales, Keith welcomed the breathing spell, but he did not know how to face his teammates. He knew Whitey had scored the biggest share of those 23 points. But he felt he had to say something — in justification, if not apology.

"That guy's murder," he panted. "He goes three ways at the same time."

Fran Minetti said consolingly: "You caught him on a hot night, Keith. He's never been this good, I'll bet."

"Sure, he can't go on like that very long," Stine said, but his voice lacked conviction. "Don't get discouraged, man."

Jack Tucker was silent. I'll bet he's getting a kick out of this, even though we're losing, Keith thought savagely.

It got worse, even though Keith sank a 25-foot set shot over Scales's loose guarding. The Superior captain flashed him a look that might have been surprise, and immediately equalized that two-pointer by himself. He started to drive to his left, changed direction without a hitch, and dribbled to the inside. Keith, taken in by the initial move, turned completely around in his effort to recover. By that time Whitey was past him and going full tilt for the basket.

"Where is he, Elliott?" The jeering voice came from behind the uprights. A Calvert rooter too, he thought unhappily. Desperately he charged on Scales a moment later; Whitey held his ground and Keith crashed into him for an obvious foul.

That was all. Dave Grant came running onto the

court and Keith walked disconsolately to the bench. The rooters gave him a cheer, but he knew their applause was no more than dutiful. Certainly he had done nothing to merit any hand clapping.

Dewey gave him a wordless pat on the back as he passed. That too was devoid of meaning, Keith knew. Tom Rourke and Billy Wilson made room for him between them on the bench in understanding silence.

He could have wept in sheer frustration. Calvert's losing was bad enough, but that he should have failed so miserably in this most exacting test was almost too much to bear.

It was no satisfaction to him to see Scales sweep around Grant as easily as before. What seared him was the knowledge that, to Jack Tucker and Walt Dewey, perhaps others, he was just one more player who had "choked up" in the clutch. He, the man who had designated the Pack as a team of choke artists who could not stand pressure!

"But I didn't, I didn't!" he repeated doggedly to himself. Scales hadn't scared him. He had just been too good.

When the half ended, it was 36-21, and although the rooters cheered loudly as the Pack filed off the court, it was evident that few held much hope of a Calvert comeback.

There were no signs of hopefulness in the dressing room, either, but, to Keith's discomfort, no one seemed as downcast as he. There was disappointment, but none of the biting discouragement he felt.

As though they had expected it, he thought. The old Calvert spirit! For a moment his scorn reawakened.

Then he remembered how little he had contributed to the success of the evening and black depression engulfed him once more. If only Scales hadn't been so hot!

Walt Dewey moved quietly from man to man. When he came to Keith, he smiled faintly, as though sharing a secret joke.

"Rough job, wasn't it?"

"Yeah," Keith muttered helplessly. "I was doing something wrong, but I still can't figure out what it was."

"Just one of those nights, Elliott. Whitey really isn't quite that good. Don't let him make you think so."

But he did not have any more chances that night, for Grant played the entire second half. Keith had to admit that Dave seemed to be doing a better job than he had, for Scales wasn't scoring as often. But he was passing off to teammates more frequently, and the other Tigers began to score too.

It was quickly apparent that the Pack was not going to make any surging comeback. Before the third quarter had ended, Superior had a 20-point lead and the Tiger coach served notice that he considered the game safely won by withdrawing Scales.

Even the Calvert rooting section applauded Whitey as he trotted to the bench.

"There goes a real ballplayer," Billy Wilson said feelingly. Keith certainly was not going to challenge that statement.

When it was over, the rooting section sang the Calvert hymn defiantly and Keith could hear it faintly as Walt Dewey closed the door of the dressing room,

leaned his back against it, and made a short speech before he admitted the newspapermen and alumni.

"All right, so we got licked," he said, wearily. "You don't like it, I don't like it. But it's only one game and we have quite a few left on the schedule, including another crack at these Tigers. Sleep it off and keep your daubers up."

Keith took a quick shower and dressed as hurriedly as he could, anxious to leave the subdued quiet of the room. But as he crossed toward the door, he was hailed by Charlie Trimble.

"Wait a minute, Elliott, will you?" Keith stopped unwillingly as the trim, gray-haired sports editor came across the room. He had the feeling that everyone was watching and listening.

"How about that Scales? Pretty good, wouldn't you say? Is he the best you've ever seen or played against?"

Keith felt himself crimsoning. Over Trimble's shoulder he glimpsed the round face of Glenn Nixon. He wondered if the graduate manager had prompted the question, and the thought made him angry.

"He couldn't have looked much better, could he?" he retorted edgily. It was a silly question. After all, the fellow had made 30 points or more.

Trimble's eyes glinted and someone snickered.

"I was just trying to get an opinion on Scales, comparing him with some of the other stars," he said mildly. "I wouldn't feel too bad about it, son. He's tied up good guards before."

"Let him off the hook, Charlie. He's tired."

It was the voice of Walt Dewey, who had quietly drifted over to join the two. The coach was smiling,

but Keith sensed that he was disturbed and perhaps worried about the reply. He was grateful for Dewey's intervention.

"I'd say he's the best I've ever seen. Or hope to." His voice sounded wooden.

"That's good enough. Thanks."

Trimble scribbled a few words on a pad and turned away, leaving Keith free to depart, seething inwardly. He had tried to sound facetious at the end, to erase the impression that he was sullen about his poor performance. But why had Trimble asked the question? Did he think Keith had tied up against Scales? A man could have an off night without being scared to death.

But he knew that was going to be hard to prove.

9

The Big Choke

LOOK," said the freshman aggressively, "we can still win the Conference. Either Mid-State or Sequoia is a cinch to lick Superior at least once, and if we don't lose any more —"

His companion snorted in derision.

"Are you kidding? We play all three of those teams away from home, and we'll be lucky to win any of 'em." He pretended to shudder. "I hate to think what Superior will do to us over there."

Force of habit had impelled Keith to stop and look in the lobby of Bannerman, to see that none of the freshmen loitering there was carving his initials in the woodwork or spinning phonograph records on the floor or engaging in any of the odd amusements which frosh ingenuity sometimes developed. The two he had overheard were seated on a sofa with their backs to him, unaware of his presence. He moved away silently and climbed the stairs to his room.

The sense of personal responsibility for the crushing defeat by Superior had ebbed away, leaving him irritable and impatient. No one, not even Jack Tucker, had implied by word or gesture that he was to blame

in any degree. Sports writers and students alike united in praise of Scales without offering criticism of the man who had guarded him.

It was this unruffled acceptance of his failure that exasperated Keith, unreasonable though he knew it to be. It was as though everyone were saying: "Well, you couldn't expect much more of Elliott. Whitey was just too good, and we knew it all along."

Even Leo Nyland had offered him a clucking sympathy more suitable to one who had lost a close relative, making Keith angrier than he would have been had the Lion Man roasted him for a poor performance. He had almost blown up because Fran Minetti had taken that approach at practice.

"You've got one consolation, Keith," the forward offered. "There's only one more game against Scales."

"Oh, for Pete's sake, Fran! Quit talking about it as though he were some monster!"

A startled look appeared on Minetti's olive features and Herb Hawes said: "Keith's a little sensitive on that subject, Fran. Better drop it."

Keith flushed.

"It's not that at all. I know I looked terrible against Whitey, but that still doesn't scare me to death. I'm waiting to get another crack at him."

Hawes's eyebrows lifted slightly, but Keith found support from an unexpected quarter. Tom Rourke had been listening to them, and now the sophomore broke in fervently.

"You tell 'em, Keith! No reason we can't whip 'em next time!"

Hawes gave the sophomore a frowning glance.

Minetti said coolly: "Sorry I mentioned it, Keith. I certainly didn't mean to upset you." He turned away with a wounded air.

Keith fumed at himself. He had not wanted to nettle Minetti, the only man on the varsity who had accepted him without reserve.

"That's talking, Keith," Rourke said, scowling after the departing seniors. "This club could use a little more of that."

Keith looked at him curiously, and the sophomore seemed suddenly abashed at his own eloquence.

"Some of 'em give up too easy," he muttered. "Remember that piece in the *Wolf Cry* last December? How the basketball team always folded up in the big games? I felt like punching that editor right on the jaw when I read it. Now I think he may have had the right idea. Why, those guys have conceded to Superior already!"

"It's not that bad, Tom." Pleased at finding someone who shared his belief, he wondered what Rourke would say if he knew who had been behind that editorial. This was not the time to reveal it, Keith decided. Perhaps when he had proved his point beyond all doubt — perhaps then.

"Are you going down to Mid-State Friday?" Keith asked Tim Robertson.

"I'd like to," the editor said. "But I hate to drive that far by myself, and I haven't found anyone else who needs a ride or who has room in his own car for me."

"What about the bus? Aren't they putting on a special one for rooters?"

"The bus company won't do that unless there are enough to fill it. Apparently there aren't."

"Sort of proves what we thought a couple of months ago, doesn't it?"

Keith spoke quietly, but he could not keep the ring of triumph out of his voice. Robertson eyed him queerly.

"I'm sorry to say it does," he answered, with a faint sigh.

The big Mid-State field house, with its high, arching roof, was filled. When the white-jerseyed Bobcats came out of the runway at one end of the court, the roar from the stands seemed to strike with almost physical impact.

Even Keith, swinging his arms to loosen up, conceded that the noise had an effect. To know that so many people were on your side counted for something; conversely, to know that many were against you also counted.

He studied his teammates covertly during the warm-up. Tucker was unsmiling, as usual, as he sighted for his corner shot. Hawes did not seem nervous, but he repeatedly clenched and unclenched his fingers as he passed the ball back and forth with Stine. Fran Minetti looked sleepy, but there were two flushed spots on his olive-skinned cheeks. Everyone looked calm enough outwardly, but Keith sensed the inward tension.

It had been a quiet ride down from Calvert, with little talking. Each man seemed occupied with his own thoughts. Walt Dewey had made no attempt to exhort

the team to great effort. But just before the Pack went out on the court, he had said, with a smile: " You've beaten this club before; you know it can be done and how to do it. Let's go."

During the warm-up Keith ran after a loose ball and passed close to Adams, the Mid-State forward. He smiled in recognition, but Adams returned only a cold stare.

So it's going to be that way, Keith thought. And it was.

The rooters began to stamp their feet in unison as the two centers, Tucker and Gladstone, came together for the jump. Gladstone tipped it, but Stine leaped in to recover. As he attempted to dribble into the forecourt, the Bobcat guard reached across him and the referee called a foul.

Although the infraction was an obvious one, the rooting section broke into raucous jeers against the official. It was going to be a noisy evening, Keith realized, and every call against the home team would bring forth boo's.

Minetti sank the free throw. Mid-State came down fast and Tucker fouled Gladstone as the Bobcat center tried to wheel under the bucket for a shot. Gladstone dropped both shots to make it 2-1. Minetti missed a difficult attempt; Mid-State rolled a guard through for a driving lay-up.

Keith retrieved, dribbled across the center line. He was loosely guarded by Adams, who evidently did not expect him to shoot. He fired long, but it was wide of the backboard. Gladstone leaped up to pull the ball down and the Bobcats broke fast. Adams cut to the

center lane, checked, and went up in the air for a spectacular jump shot that split the cords to make it 6-1. Jack Tucker signaled for a time out.

"Let's buckle down," he said impatiently. "Elliott, don't waste shots — set it up, will you? We can take these guys."

Keith accepted the reproof without comment, although he felt resentfully that he was entitled to one miss. Tucker looked worried. Calvert had never before been as much as 5 points behind.

For a few moments it looked better. Hawes sank a 30-footer, and Tucker fooled his guard with a beautiful driving hook shot. But Mid-State retaliated with a burst of speed that brought three straight baskets. The last one was set up when Adams intercepted one of Hawes's passes and came right down the middle.

Keith waited for him at the foul line, but the Bobcat made no effort to swerve. At the edge of the keyhole Adams leaped and shot as Keith went up, arms high, to block it.

They crashed in mid-air and both went sprawling. Adams got up grinning, for the shot had been good and over the noise of the rooters, the referee was calling a foul on Keith.

"Oh, Ref, I had position on him," Keith protested.

"You had it, but you moved out of it," the official retorted crisply over his shoulder.

"Shut up, Elliott," Tucker said in a low voice. Adams grinned again, and sank the free throw for 13-5.

Smarting with anger, Keith took Hawes's in-bound pass and dribbled slowly up the court. The Pack's three front-line men were maneuvering near the basket, but

Adams again was just a trifle slow covering him. Keith decided to go all the way on his own.

Suddenly accelerating his dribble, he charged for the bucket, half hoping that some Bobcat would get in his path. It would have pleased him to bowl somebody over.

But none did, although Gladstone made a futile grab for the ball. Keith, rolling at top speed, went past him and up on the right side of the basket to lay the ball over the edge of the iron. Tucker would tell him to shut up, would he?

Mid-State scored twice, though, before Stine lifted one from the side, and the tumultuous roar from the rooting section filled the big field house. When the score reached 25-12, Calvert called another time out.

Keith thought he could detect the first signs of despair as the Pack sank to the floor in a tight little circle.

"That's a hot team," Stine said ruefully, between gasps.

"Well, we didn't figure to beat them here," Herb Hawes said, with an air of resignation, and Minetti gave a little nod that indicated he agreed.

That's fine, Keith thought scornfully and waited for Tucker to challenge this virtual surrender. But the captain only said, in a worried manner: "You're not coming close enough on those pick-offs, Fran. You too, Mel. The guard keeps sliding through."

Keith forgot the score in an inward surge of triumph. Tucker seemed to be giving up too. So he had been right, all along! Away from the friendly surroundings of their own court, and under pressure of this sort, the Wolf Pack was folding up. Like an accordion, as Tim

Robertson had put it in the *Wolf Cry*, as he himself had put it earlier.

He thought that Walt Dewey could see it too. With five minutes left in the first half, and the Bobcats in front by 33-19, the Calvert substitutes began to come in. But if Dewey did feel that the Pack was overawed, nothing he said between halves revealed it. Mid-State's lead was 15 points, a commanding one but not impossible to overcome.

"A real, ripsnorting fight talk wouldn't do any harm," Keith told himself. It might not do any good, he admitted, but it was worth a try to jolt the Pack out of its seeming resignation to inevitable defeat.

But the coach devoted his attention to details of play, with no effort to lash his players to a higher emotional pitch. To Keith, he talked only of Adams and Gladstone and how he might better keep the forward out of his favorite shooting spot. He sounded matter-of-fact, not discouraged, as though he simply assumed that the Pack would play better ball in the second half.

The Mid-State band was blaring loudly as they went back to the court, and Keith sensed a sudden surge of resolution as the five regulars gathered in a tight circle and clasped hands before they took their places for the tip-off.

"Go after 'em, fellows," Dewey said quietly, and Herb Hawes made a gesture of defiance with his clenched fist.

Keith edged close to Adams, a hard gleam in his gray eyes. If the Pack fought it out, they could at least remove those confident smiles from the Bobcats' faces, win or lose.

But Mid-State was first to score, as a guard rolled through on a post play, followed up with another as Gladstone intercepted a bad pass and galloped down court. Keith could almost feel the Pack's resolution begin to evaporate. He took the ball across the center line by himself, driving recklessly for the basket, but was called for a charging foul before he could get the ball away.

The Bobcat guard with whom he had collided was knocked spinning off balance and staggered back several feet. The rooters jeered Keith roundly as the teams walked toward the Calvert basket for the free throw.

"Don't lose your head, man," Mel Stine said in a hoarse whisper as he fell in step with Keith, scowling with frustration. He was going to give the Bobcats an argument — all by himself, if necessary.

Mid-State scored again before Tucker sank one, lighting a faint spark of hope among the Pack. It was extinguished at once as Adams came right back for a jump shot, and once again Keith took the bit in his teeth.

Paying no heed to Hawes on the other side of the court, he drove straight up the middle and cast off from 30 feet out. The ball went through cleanly, but as the Pack retreated Tucker said swiftly: "Quit trying to play the game single-handed, Elliott. There are four other men on the team."

"Are there?" Keith answered scornfully. "They don't seem to be trying awfully hard."

The captain's face went white. Quick as a flash, he held up his hands to signal a time out, slowing the onrushing Bobcats. Then he walked hurriedly to the

bench where Walt Dewey, with a puzzled look, had risen to his feet.

Keith saw the expression on the coach's face change to one of deep concern. Then Dave Grant rose and began to peel hurriedly out of his jacket.

It required a mere instant for Keith to grasp the fact that Grant was coming out to replace him, and the shock of it was like a dash of cold water in his face. Tucker, his eyes slitted with fury, retraced his steps toward center court and said curtly, "You're out, Elliott."

Keith walked slowly toward the side lines. That Tucker had demanded his removal was all too clear, but in the midst of his own anger he knew a harsh satisfaction. Unfair though it might be, it justified all he had felt from the very beginning. The captain knew the Pack had chucked it. Calvert was through for the night.

There could no longer be any doubt of that. Even before Keith had put on his jacket, Mid-State had burst through for another field goal and a few minutes later Walt Dewey gave up too, to all appearances. He turned the court over to the sophomores, who contributed more enthusiasm than skill. It was 72-47 when it ended — a real thrashing.

"What a mess!" Tom Rourke grimaced in disgust. The sophomore had played the final fifteen minutes without distinguishing himself.

"I don't mind losing," he added, drying himself off briskly, "but I sure hate getting walloped the way we did tonight. From a club that has no business doing that to us."

Keith, still seething, gave him a look.

"Say, why did the coach yank you so early?"

"Ask the captain." Keith could barely conceal the steel in his reply. "It was his idea."

Rourke stopped toweling himself and stared at Keith openmouthed.

"Was that it?" He seemed incredulous. "Gosh, I knew you and Jack weren't exactly buddies, but —" His voice trailed off, and he shook his head.

They stood outside the field house by the waiting bus, talking in low tones. Only Dewey and the manager were left inside. As Keith wandered restlessly in front of the pavilion, Adams, the Bobcat forward, came out.

"Nice game, Jack," he said to Tucker, trying not to sound patronizing. The Calvert captain, the collar of his overcoat pulled up around his ears, gave him a thin smile.

"Not too good, was it? Well, hope you win the rest of 'em, Roy."

"Thanks. We catch Superior next week, and we'll need everybody's good wishes." Adams grinned, then asked with frank curiosity: "What happened to you fellows against 'em? Too much Scales?"

Keith, standing several feet away, strained to hear Tucker's reply.

"I guess you could call it that."

Adams shrugged. "Oh, well, you didn't figure to beat them, anyway." He eyed Tucker whimsically.

"You think so?" The captain put the question mildly, as though he were in no mood to argue. Adams gave him a breezy wave of the hand and departed.

The nerve of the guy! Keith thought as he watched the Bobcat's figure disappear in the darkness. And Tucker had taken that sauce without protest.

He would have a few things to tell Tim Robertson about the Calvert basketball team when he saw him. None of them would be in the nature of an apology, either.

10

Tim Speaks His Piece

SURE I understand, but what do you want me to do? ”

Tim Robertson, still in his pajamas, sat on the edge of his bed, shading his eyes against the wintry sunlight streaming in the window. His hair was rumpled and from time to time he yawned. It was Sunday morning, and he had been listening without visible enthusiasm to Keith's voluble description of last night's Mid-State game.

“Do?” Keith's forehead puckered. “I don't know that I expect you to do anything. I'm just explaining how the club folded up. Honestly, Tim, it just rolled over and died the first time that big rooting section opened up. It was really pitiful.”

The editor pushed a lock of hair out of his eyes and nodded somberly.

“It didn't sound too good on the radio. Incidentally, what happened to you in the second half? You seemed to be doing pretty well, but all of a sudden you were out of there.”

“By special request of his majesty, King Tucker,” Keith answered and launched into an account of that incident.

Tim's thin features looked grave. "What did Dewey say?"

"Not a word — not even after the game. I know he couldn't stand there and argue with Jack in the middle of a time out, but he must be plenty upset about it. Of all the ridiculous moves!"

Tim sighed. "What a mess! I wish I'd stayed away from the whole subject."

Keith bristled. "Are you backing down? I remember your telling Tucker in this very room that the basketball team was the concern of all the students and that you had a perfect right to tell them about it."

Robertson stood up, pajamas hanging loosely on his slight frame. "I remember it too." He sounded unhappy. "It seemed like a great idea at the time. I wonder now if it hasn't done more harm than good."

"That's a fine way to talk!" Keith was indignant. "It was all my fault, I suppose! I didn't ask you to write that editorial."

"Of course you didn't! Don't go sensitive on me. It was my own doing and I'm not trying to shove it off on you. All I'm saying is that now I don't think it was so smart of me to write the editorial."

"Why not?"

"Well, look at the results. The team gets sore, the coach gets sore. Glenn Nixon gets sore because he's afraid Jim Madison won't give us the new gym. You and Jack Tucker are at each other's throats. Maybe you've had some fun out of playing basketball, but I don't see how you could enjoy being ordered off the court as you were last night."

His hands turned up in an expressive motion.

"So," he went on doggedly, "if I hadn't written the editorial, you wouldn't have felt you had to go out for the team, no one would have been mad at anyone else, Calvert might still get its new gym, and the Pack would probably have won just as many games as it has won. See what I mean?"

Keith heard him with growing dismay. "I see what you mean, all right. You think it would have been better to butter up the basketball team by writing about what a great bunch of boys it had. You don't deny there was a bad situation, do you?"

"No, I don't." Tim sounded weary, as though he despaired of making his roommate understand. "And I never intended to butter up the team, as you put it. There was a bad situation, I admit, but printing the truth didn't help it. It probably made it worse. I wish I had kept quiet. That's simple enough, isn't it?"

He stared at Keith defiantly. But whatever logic Keith might have found in his roommate's argument, had he stopped to consider it carefully, was buried in bewilderment and wounded pride. Tim was deserting him at the very moment when he felt an urgent need for support. That hurt.

"Well, thanks awfully," he said, trying to mask his feelings with heavy sarcasm. "Any time you need another idea for an editorial, don't hesitate to call on me."

He wheeled and went out of the room, aware that he was acting like a sulky schoolboy, but too much upset to care. A freshman greeted him shyly as he strode down the hall and he snapped, "Hello," in a voice so harsh that the frosh was startled.

There was a sting in the air as he emerged from the

dormitory and struck out aimlessly, hands jammed into his trouser pockets and his scowling face reflecting his inner turmoil.

"The team's right back where it was under Frosty Jones," he told himself bitterly. "A bunch of home-court front runners, and everybody knows it."

That included Tucker and Dewey. With Jack, it was a personal matter, and, of course, the coach had to go along with his captain. But that didn't mean Keith was wrong. Why couldn't Tim see that?

I wasn't asking him to run another editorial, he thought moodily. But the least he could do was to stick up for me personally. Made it worse, he says. How about those one-point wins over Mid-State and Sequoia? Who does he think won those games?

The insistent squawk of an automobile horn wrenched him out of his own thoughts. He had almost stepped into the path of a car turning out of a side road into the main drive leading from the campus to downtown Woodland.

He stopped with a sheepish look to let the car pass and realized, with some surprise, that he had walked more than halfway to the town. For a moment he stood in indecision. But he saw no profit in returning to Bannerman, with Tim in his present frame of mind. He might as well keep going, since he had not had breakfast, and Harlow's was renowned for its hot cakes.

He ate slowly and with relish, and some of his wounded resentment evaporated with the last hot cake. He paid his check at the cashier's desk and went out the door just as Jack Tucker and Catherine Stone turned into the entranceway.

All three appeared disconcerted at the unexpected meeting, but only for an instant. The girl, looking tinier than ever beside her tall cousin, was the first to recover her composure.

"The great Mr. Elliott," she said scornfully, eyes flashing. "What a help you've been to everybody!"

Keith flinched involuntarily at her hostility, but he rebounded swiftly. He would have been happy enough to slide out of the awkward encounter by passing the pair in silence, but the girl's voice punctured his layer of self-control and indignation escaped from him like air whooshing out of a balloon.

"I don't think anyone needed help," he snapped furiously. "Seems they'd all been happy to die standing up, the way they always have."

Tucker's forehead wrinkled in protest as Cathie started to speak. Perhaps he too would have been content to pass without a word. But at the unmistakable anger in Keith's retort, he flushed to the roots of his dark hair.

"Snap it off, Elliott," he said curtly, and took hold of the girl's arm. "Come on, Cathie, let's go in."

But the girl was having none of it.

"A fine thing for you to say, of all people!" she flared back at Keith. "After the way you played against Whitey Scales! You have a nerve accusing anyone of folding up after that performance."

Keith drew in his breath sharply. He did not see the quick grimace that might have been regret flash across Tucker's features, for his gray eyes, hard with anger, were fixed on the girl.

"A very clever remark," he gritted. "I know you

didn't think it up all by yourself."

He brushed past the two of them into the street. If Catherine Stone hadn't been a girl, and had been a foot taller, he thought, he'd have taken a punch at her — him, that is. And then taken another at Tucker. The girl had called him a choke artist, right to his face. That was something the captain didn't have the courage to do, but he'd talk about it to his cousin, and to the rest of the Wolf Pack too, no doubt.

"Well, let's see how well Hawes or Grant can do against Whitey next time," he said, half aloud, as he strode along. "I'm finished right now."

The thought of quitting the team seemed to lessen his wrath and lift his spirits. Yes, sir, he was done with the Wolf Pack. He had tried and he had failed. It could fall apart by itself in the three games remaining, but he wouldn't be there when that happened. From now on he was just Keith Elliott, senior sponsor and late of the Calvert varsity.

He was in an exhilarated mood by the time he reached Bannerman, bursting with the news of his sudden decision. He hoped Tim hadn't left the room yet, for he wanted to tell his roommate first of all.

Let's see what Tim says to that! he thought.

He took the stairs two at a time and flung open the door. Tim was still there, sitting on the bed, but as Keith advanced into the room, another figure arose from a chair in the corner. It was Glenn Nixon, the director of athletics, and the unconcealed irritation on his chubby face gave him the look of a petulant Kewpie doll.

"We have a visitor," Robertson observed dryly, but

Nixon was clearly in no mood for either formalities or pleasantries.

"Elliott," he growled, "you and Robertson have certainly gone out of your way to make trouble for us. I wish I knew why. You two young wise guys have just cost us a new gym!"

Keith glanced swiftly at Tim, who raised his shoulders in an expressive shrug.

"The gym Mr. Madison was thinking about?" Keith asked.

Nixon nodded vigorously, and seemed to quiver with emotion.

"Exactly! And why? Because of that fool editorial in the *Wolf Cry* and your smart-alecky reply when he asked you a simple question. He told one of our trustees yesterday that he'd made up his mind to give the money for a new Law Library wing."

"If we don't get the gym, that's too bad," Keith said, trying to inject a note of reason. "But I can't believe the president of a big corporation — a man like Jim Madison — is going to spend a quarter million dollars one way or the other because of what Tim or I have said. That sounds plain silly to me."

"Silly, is it?" Nixon sputtered in indignation. "I know for a fact he was ready to sign the check two months ago. But Robertson's editorial started him asking questions, and then you put more doubt in his mind up there at Canyon City. There can't be any other reason."

Keith tried to show a contrition he did not feel. The athletic director was obviously distressed, but Keith was sure James Madison knew what he was doing.

Nixon took quick note of Keith's regretful expression.

"It may not be too late to stop it," he said hastily, and now there was a persuasive ring in his voice. "If you and Robertson each write him a letter, it might help. He may still change his mind. It's a long shot, but it's worth trying."

"Write Madison a letter? About what?" Keith was puzzled.

"Explaining that he might have misunderstood you that night," Nixon said impatiently. "Tell him there's nothing wrong with the Calvert spirit, that you didn't mean anything like that." He swung around to Tim, who had been listening with a queer smile.

"As for you, Robertson, you'll have to backtrack on that editorial some way. Cover up, admit you were mistaken, something like that. It might swing him over."

Keith stared at Glenn as though he had not heard aright. "I can't speak for Tim, but personally I don't believe letters from us would have the slightest influence on Madison, and even if I thought they would, I wouldn't write one."

Nixon was aghast. "Why not?"

"It wouldn't be true. There is something wrong with the Pack."

"I won't write one either, Glenn," Tim chimed in quietly. "For the same reason."

Nixon looked at them in shocked disbelief. "You mean you wouldn't do it even if it meant a new gym?"

He saw the answer on their faces and he seemed to swell up in fury. "Very well. But if there's anything

wrong with the team, I guess you know who's to blame. You two have been the troublemakers from the start and you're responsible. I can't force you to write letters, but I'll make it my business to let everyone know why Calvert isn't getting a new pavilion. See how you like that! "

He stormed out of the room, slamming the door. Keith looked wide-eyed at Tim for a moment, aware that his own anger was mounting.

"The crust of that man!" he burst out. "Wanting us to lie in our teeth! Gym or no gym, I'm going to tell him a few things."

Tim started to speak, but Keith was out the door. Down the corridor, he glimpsed Nixon's portly figure just turning into the stairway and he broke into a run.

But he had gone only a few strides when he slowed his pace. Nothing could be gained, he realized, but additional hard feelings. Nixon had made an outrageous suggestion in his obvious desperation; you couldn't reason with a man in that state of mind.

At the head of the stairway he halted.

"Ah, let it go," he muttered disgustedly and slowly walked back to the room. As he re-entered, he heard a yell in which astonishment and wrath were blended. It seemed to come from outside, just below their room. Tim was leaning against the wall, a few feet from an open window.

"What was that?" Keith demanded. He heard the sound of windows being pushed up in nearby rooms, followed by shouts of laughter and a few calls of mock sympathy. The tone of the voices was ominously familiar, and he started quickly toward the window.

Robertson loomed in his path.

"Don't bother looking out," he said casually. "It's nothing — someone just dropped a water bag."

"That stuff again? Oh, for the love of Mike!"

Now even more upset, Keith attempted to side-step Tim, but again his roommate blocked him.

"What's the idea —" Keith began, then stopped and gulped, apprehension written on his face.

"Not Nixon?" he asked hoarsely.

Tim, with an angelic look, inclined his head gently.

"You?"

"Dead center," Robertson said complacently.

"You lunatic!" he breathed. "If he knows it was you, you're dead. As a sponsor and as an editor."

"Ha!" Robertson said contemptuously. "Nobody saw me. And even if Glenn knew, he wouldn't dare complain. It may be all right for him to come in and try to bulldoze us privately, but how do you suppose the faculty would like it? Dean Bliss would ask me why I did it, and I'd tell him Nixon insulted my honor by asking me to write a phony letter. Glenn's smart enough to figure that out. He won't peep, I'll bet my diploma."

"You — you —" Keith groped in admiration. "You ought to be prime minister, or something. You're absolutely right — Glenn would look bad if that got nosed around. I think Prexy would rather have the library wing, anyway."

"Yeah." Tim sighed. "In a way, I feel sorry for our fat friend. He's right about one thing, you know. The two of us have made a lot of trouble, for all our good intentions."

Keith's lips tightened. He had momentarily forgot-

ten that he was not at all pleased with Tim, Jack Tucker, Cathie Stone, and pretty nearly everyone he could think of.

"Now, wait a minute," he bristled. "I'm not going to buy that."

"O. K., O. K. Let's not debate it, since our minds are made up. I'm sure tired of arguments."

Keith was disarmed and he realized it. Besides, he was still filled with admiration for his roommate's colossal nerve.

"All right, we won't argue," he said grudgingly. "But I'm not going to be any more trouble, as you put it. Not after tomorrow."

Tim wanted to know why, and Keith told him swiftly of his meeting with Tucker and the girl and his abrupt decision to quit the team.

"It's an impossible situation, Tim. It has to be either Jack or me, the way it stands, and I can't force a showdown on it with Dewey. He'll string with Tucker, naturally."

Robertson pondered for a moment. "Sure he would, if you insist on putting it to him that way. But what'll you tell him when he asks why you're quitting?"

"I hadn't thought much about that. I just decided on it half an hour ago."

"Well, why not keep your mouth shut and play out the season? Only three weeks to go." Tim cocked his head to one side as he spoke, like some wise old bird.

"What good would that do," Keith asked, "with both the coach and the captain gunning for me? No, sir, I've done my best, and they don't want it."

"Don't sound so self-righteous," Tim said with such

obvious annoyance that Keith drew back as though he had been slapped. "The trouble with this whole deal is that you've been more concerned about proving you were right than in helping the ball club. I've suspected that for quite a while. Well, that's all right too, but for heaven's sake stop acting like a white knight out to save the world."

Now Keith was dumfounded. "You're insane!" he spluttered when he could find words. "That's ridiculous. I — I —"

"It is? Think it over, chum. Did you turn out for basketball to help the Pack or to prove to a girl that you could make the first team? Give me the straight answer."

"Why — why —" Keith began to splutter again, his face brick-red. The accusation caught him totally unprepared. Bewildered and hurt, he groped for a reply that would shatter the charge and hurl the fragments back in his roommate's face.

With a feeling of shock he realized that he could frame no reply. He had been working for the greater glory of Keith Elliott, really. Not the success of the team. How right he had been and how much he could contribute to that success had been his chief concerns from the start. Caught up in personal antagonisms, he had been unable to see the picture in its proper perspective, as Tim had.

"Well?" Robertson asked, sharp-eyed.

Keith's shoulders sagged imperceptibly. His roommate had pinned him to the wall, and he could only struggle feebly.

"You're pretty smart, aren't you?" he growled, try-

ing not to look as guilty as he felt. " O. K., so I wanted to prove I was right. And I was right! " he blurted, in one last defiant shot.

" I know you were! " Tim told him. " Get it through your square head that I concede that freely. But you didn't fix anything, the way you went about it. That's my point. And you're not fixing anything by walking away from the wreck and pretending it's none of your business. You'll just unfix things more."

" Well, what do you suggest? " Keith asked helplessly. He had never felt more depressed.

" Nothing," Tim said. " And you might try saying nothing too. I know it will be hard at first, but try."

Keith opened his mouth, then shut it. He could have shaken Tim, but he had no arguments to offer against him.

" How about it? Will you take a bit of advice?"

Keith gave a little sigh.

" I won't even answer that question," he said ruefully.

11

Keith Asks and Answers

KEITH discovered the next day that remaining silent was not as difficult as keeping another person's mouth shut. Tom Rourke's, for one.

Leo Nyland approached him between classes, looking concerned.

"What's this I hear about you and Jack Tucker almost slugging it out after the Mid-State game?" he asked anxiously.

"Wha-a-at? Where did you get that rot?"

"Some joker in the cafeteria. Said he heard it from a friend of that soph guard, Rourke."

Keith inwardly berated both himself and Tom. But he tried to sound jocular.

"Nothing to it, Leo. Not a hand raised in anger, so help me."

Nyland showed his relief. "I didn't think so. I know you and Jack don't get along too well, but I couldn't figure you raising that sort of ruckus. Too bad, though, we couldn't keep up that fast start. What happened Saturday?"

"One of those things." Keith shrugged. "We just didn't have it."

There, he thought. He had kept his mouth shut. Tim should be proud of him. The next thing was to put a clamp on Tom Rourke's tongue.

He did not know exactly where to look for the sophomore, but he felt it best to talk to him privately before practice. The best place to intercept him, he decided, would be the gym.

He appeared at the gym an hour before practice was scheduled to begin, prepared to loiter there until Rourke showed up. As he walked down the corridor leading to the lockers, the door of Walt Dewey's office swung open and the coach stepped out into the hall so swiftly that Keith had to step aside to avoid running into him.

"Well, Elliott!" Dewey said. "Just the man I want to see. Come on in."

Keith followed him back into the office with an uneasy feeling. There was nothing cordial about the coach's manner as he shut the door and seated himself on the edge of his desk, swinging his long legs back and forth. He looked very businesslike and Keith's uneasiness increased.

"Elliott, will you tell me exactly what you've been trying to do?"

Dewey put the question with an air of exasperated bafflement, and his eyes bored into Keith's face.

Keith flushed. "I don't understand," he said, but he was afraid that he did. This was going to be no fun at all.

Dewey kicked one heel against the side of the desk.

"You don't strike me as a fellow who likes to stir up trouble just to be stirring up trouble," the coach

said in that same tone of bewilderment. "You've sure succeeded in doing it, though. I'd like to know what you had in mind when you came out for basketball. Did you want to help us, or did you just want to show what a smart aleck you were?"

The abruptness of it left Keith floundering. Dewey added: "You did help for a while, I'll give you that. But not now. I practically had to get down on my knees to Charlie Trimble this morning to keep him from printing a story about you."

"About me?"

"Are you surprised?" The coach smiled without humor. "There are quite a few of them going around. I think Glenn Nixon's been talking to Trimble. There's another man who isn't exactly pleased with you."

Keith, blinking in discomfiture, bristled at this. On that subject he felt he need not defend himself.

"Nixon can jump in the lake," he burst out. "He wanted me to write a letter to Madison saying something that was absolutely false, as far as I was concerned. I'm sorry Madison isn't going to give the school a new gym, but, as I told Nixon, I don't believe he makes decisions on what one student might say. And even if he did, I wouldn't have written that particular letter."

"I can't say I blame you for that." For the first time, Dewey's manner seemed to soften. "Glenn's been hipped about that new gym for years, and sometimes he gets carried away by the idea. I think Madison was a little disturbed by that *Wolf Cry* editorial, but I'm sure that didn't make him change his mind — if he'd

actually decided to give us the gym in the first place. Glenn claimed to know that he had, but Madison never came out and said so, to my knowledge."

The coach gave a slight shake of his close-cropped head. "No, I don't feel too badly about that. We'll get the gym eventually. But I do feel badly about some of the other things Charlie Trimble asked about. Bad blood between you and Jack Tucker, and why we fell apart so fast after that fine start. I hate to see that aired in public, whether it's true or not."

Keith shifted his feet nervously under Dewey's unwavering gaze.

"I don't know what story he has about Tucker and me," he said steadily, "but any trouble between us is of Jack's making, not mine. He was dead set against my even turning out for the team, and he told me so. He's circulated stuff about me that isn't true; he's looked on me as an intruder from the start. And Saturday night against Mid-State —" He stopped.

Dewey knew what he meant. The coach had been listening with a frown of unhappiness.

"I don't know what stories he may have circulated about you, Elliott, but I'll tell you this much. Where I've been concerned in this, Jack Tucker's spoken much more fairly of you than you did of him just now."

"I imagine that's a matter of opinion," Keith said stiffly.

"I wanted to drop you from the squad two days after you came out. Tucker asked me to let you stay because he felt you were a good player once and might help us."

After the manner in which Jack had ripped into him that first day of practice, Keith could scarcely credit

his hearing. Dewey must be simple-minded to believe that.

"You don't think so?" the coach asked. "When you came in here last December, I didn't know you had any connection with that editorial. If I had — well, never mind. I don't know Robertson, but I still feel he did a cruel and unnecessary thing by printing it, true or not. There was nothing to be gained by protesting in public, though, so I kept quiet. I could see the scars it left on the kids, just the same, and I was boiling."

Keith winced a little. Dewey made it sound brutal indeed, and shame stirred within him.

"I hadn't intended anything like that," he said, looking at the floor. Then his head came up. "But I never tried to hide my part in it. Jack knew it was my idea, because I told him so, and I took it for granted he had told you."

"He hadn't. I learned it from someone not even on the team, and I don't mind telling you I was outraged. I called Jack in and told him I didn't want you around. He wouldn't agree, although he admitted he'd felt the same way at first. But he'd thought about it and talked it over with the other seniors on the squad. They'd decided that anyone who could help the Pack ought to get the chance. They didn't care for that editorial, naturally — or for you personally, I imagine — but they haven't made an issue of it, have they? Jack was insistent on that. And you don't call that being fair?"

Keith swallowed. So his teammates had known from the very beginning and had never challenged him on it. It simply did not add up.

"If Jack did that," he blurted, "why has he done

all the other things, like accusing me of choking up against Whitey Scales, for example? And that rumor I turned Floyd Michaels in to the dean so I would be sure to make the first string? ”

It was Dewey's turn to show incredulity. “ Jack did that? ”

“ Well, he denied having anything to do with the Michaels story,” Keith admitted reluctantly, “ but it was his cousin who accused me — you know that Stone girl? And he was standing right beside her when she came up with the choke angle. Where would she get that stuff if not from him? ”

The coach rubbed his knuckles against his head as though trying to shake the cobwebs loose.

“ This is all brand-new to me,” he confessed. “ I don't know Miss Stone, though I've met her once or twice. But I don't see how Jack could start any rumor about Floyd. Nobody turned him in to the dean. He told the doctor at the hospital who he was and why he was there when he went to see how that freshman was — the same night the kid was hurt. That was common knowledge.”

“ This is the first time I'd heard it,” Keith said. “ I know for a fact some persons thought I had done it because I had recognized him. And Jack's cousin said I had — right to my face.”

Dewey permitted a brief smile to touch his lips. “ She must be quite an interesting girl.”

The smile disappeared. “ As for your choking against Scales, I've never heard even a whisper of that. Whitey was on his stick that night, that's all.” He paused. “ Any-one besides the lady mention it? ”

"No-o. Not to me, that is."

"In that case, maybe your argument is with her, and not Jack."

Keith wasn't ready to give Tucker a perfectly clean slate, despite Dewey's surprising revelations.

"What about Saturday?" he demanded. "He did have me benched. And why? Because I was trying my best?"

Dewey's eyebrows went up and he regarded Keith speculatively. "Now we come to what I really wanted to discuss with you. That's your attitude. You told Jack the rest of the team weren't doing their best. Right?"

Keith swallowed. "I did," he said steadily.

"I don't think it was true. If it were, it shouldn't have been said. Do you honestly feel, Elliott, that your teammates are a bunch of quitters?"

Phrased that way, it had an ugly ring, Keith realized, but it was what he had implied.

"There isn't a senior on the squad who has any confidence in his heart when he goes out on a strange court against any of the good teams," he said doggedly. "I've believed that for three years, just watching the Pack. This season I've been right in the middle of it and I know it's true. I admit I've made a jackass of myself more than once, but that doesn't alter the facts."

"No, it doesn't." The coach's youthful face seemed lined with weariness. "You're right; the Pack does lack confidence. I was hoping we'd show a little more this year — that some of the sophomores and juniors would get a lift, and the veterans would catch it too. Our seniors are our best players, but none of them has ever

played on a team that beat Superior, and they keep remembering that.

"But you can't drive confidence into a man with a hammer," he went on. "You can't call him a choke artist and expect him to stop choking just because you've told him he is one. That sort of confidence builds up from inside. You've always had it, Elliott. It's not so easy for those who haven't."

Dewey was speaking with intense feeling, and Keith could find nothing to say.

"After that piece in the *Wolf Cry*, after we lost Michaels, I knew it was going to be rough." The coach began to tap his heel aimlessly against the side of the desk once more. "And it has been rough, even though we did win a couple of games I didn't think we would. I'll give you full marks there, Elliott. But the fact is, we don't have as good a team as Superior, or Mid-State, or Sequoia. We were lucky, I think.

"But it isn't the losing that bothers me — it's the way we lost. After last Saturday I'm quite discouraged. The year's been wasted. I'm going to have to start from the very beginning again."

There was a long silence.

"And you blame me," Keith said humbly. He was not going to dispute it, for he was beginning to grasp what his insistence on being right had meant to team and coach. He had proved what he had set out to prove; even Dewey admitted that. But he found no satisfaction in it, for it had cost everybody too much.

"No, I guess not," Dewey said, weary. "I really didn't call you in to pin the blame on you for anything. Mostly I wanted to find out what was going on in your

mind, and what to do about it."

Keith hesitated. "You think the Pack would be better off without me?"

"Physically, no. Mentally, possibly. If you're of the same frame of mind you showed Saturday, I'll say you're no asset. You've already played enough to earn a letter, if that interests you."

"It doesn't." He would not have the courage to wear it now, Keith thought miserably. He sensed that Walt Dewey would be uncomfortable if he were to say now how much he regretted what had gone before. But he had one more thing to prove — to himself.

"I'd like to get another crack at Whitey Scales." It was more of an entreaty than a question, and Dewey considered it for only an instant.

"It's a deal," he said crisply. "See you tomorrow. I'm calling off practice this afternoon." Suddenly his eyes began to twinkle.

"Now I have a question before you leave. Did you hit Glenn Nixon with a water bag?"

Taken completely by surprise, Keith gulped. "No, sir."

He went out hastily, eager to escape further questioning and even more anxious to untangle his own turbulent thoughts.

The first pin points of a sleety rain struck him in the face like so many needles as he stepped outside the gym, but he was barely aware of it as he hurried along the path toward Bannerman. He had too much on his mind to pay attention to the weather, or where he was going, for that matter.

So he did not see the small rock in the middle of the

path, and when he stepped squarely on top of it, it slid out from under and his foot turned. His weight came down on the ankle and the next instant he was sitting on the ground, the first feeling of foolishness giving way quickly to the throbbing pain shooting up his right leg.

Instinctively, he tried to get up and then his features went pale and tiny beads of perspiration stood out on his forehead.

He sat there clutching his ankle for what seemed a long time but was really only a few minutes, until a figure came hurrying down the path in the direction of the gym.

"Well, for — What happened to you?" Jack Tucker asked, looking down at him in wonderment.

It would have to be Jack, Keith thought savagely.

"Ankle. Slipped." It was really hurting now, and it was an effort to get the words out.

Tucker looked quickly up and down the path, saw no one. He took a deep breath, bent over, and got a grip under Keith's arms.

"Let's try it this way," he said. "See if we can make it to the gym."

It was the longest hundred yards Keith had ever traveled. He had one arm across Tucker's shoulders and Jack was carrying most of his weight. But each time he hopped, like a crippled bird, the jar sent little tongues of fire licking the length of his right leg.

Painful though it was, he found a certain grim amusement in the situation. It would take something like a broken leg to bring him and Jack Tucker that close together!

When they reached the gym, Tucker disengaged his arm gently and eased Keith to a seat on the bottom step.

"I'll get some help. Easier to carry you up the stairs."

He came out a minute later with Walt Dewey, who winced in sympathy at the white, strained look on Keith's face. One on each side, they lifted him and carried him inside to the trainer's room and propped him up on a table.

"I'll round up Doc Feeney," the coach said, and disappeared.

"How's it feel?" Tucker asked. "Like it's busted?"

"I don't know. It feels awful."

But it wasn't a break. Feeney, the team doctor, hustled in at Dewey's heels, felt the swollen joint with deft, gentle fingers, and announced with satisfaction that it looked like no more than a severe sprain.

"We'll put some ice packs on it at once," he said briskly. "That ought to stop the swelling. Then I'll tape it, and if it doesn't feel better tomorrow, we'll take X-rays. But I'm pretty sure it's not broken."

He turned to Dewey. "Is there anyone here who could run over to the infirmary and pick up a pair of crutches?"

"I'll go, Doc," Tucker said as Keith began to protest.

"Crutches? I thought you said it wasn't broken."

Feeney looked at Keith as though he were feeble-minded.

"Would you rather have a wheel chair?" he inquired tartly. "You won't be walking on that ankle for a few days, son."

Keith subsided. From the way it felt now he doubted whether he would ever walk on it again, but he had

made the protest instinctively. He didn't want Tucker going after the crutches, that was all. He didn't want to be under any more obligations to the captain.

But Jack was still there, watching quietly, nearly an hour later when the doctor had finished his careful taping. That process caused Keith to catch his breath sharply more than once, but, bandaged tightly, the ankle did feel better. The crutches dismayed him, though. Clumsiest piece of machinery he'd ever handled, he thought.

"You'll be surprised how fast you'll get used to them," Feeney assured him. "By tomorrow you'll be a regular cat."

Dewey, who had been standing by silently, said, "I'll drive him back to Bannerman, Doc."

"I'll go along, Coach," Tucker said quickly. "He'll need help getting up those stairs."

Dewey shot the captain a curious glance. Keith found it almost humiliating to hear the two of them being so solicitous about him.

Between them they got him into the back seat of the coach's car, with his bad leg propped up. Dewey drove slowly and carefully through the rain to Bannerman.

"Much obliged," Keith said awkwardly. "Hate to put you to all this trouble." He looked at Tucker and tried to sound casual. "No need for you to come in, Jack. There's bound to be someone hanging around the lobby who'll give me a hand up the stairs."

"What if there isn't?" The captain was equally casual. "I'll come in."

Keith realized he could not gracefully protest further and gave way. They helped him out of the car, and

then Dewey drove off, after exacting Keith's promise to call him next day.

Progress up the inside stairs was slow and painful, and accompanied by much puffing and grunting. Eventually, though, they made the room and Keith eased himself down on the edge of his bed. Tim was not there.

"Can you manage until your roommate gets here?" Tucker asked.

"Oh, sure. He'll be back before dinner. Besides, I might as well start learning how to manage these sticks."

He wished Jack would make some move to leave.

"Thanks again for all your trouble," he said. "I might have been sitting in the rain yet if you hadn't come along."

"I doubt that." Tucker gave a short laugh. "Lots of traffic there. Well —" he began to edge toward the door, but seemed to be hesitating, as though there were something on his mind. "Hope it gets better fast."

"It'll be all right. Week or two, I guess."

"Washes you out of basketball, doesn't it?"

Keith's eyebrows went up. He hadn't, until that moment, thought about that.

"Why, I guess it does," he replied slowly. "Unless — well, it could be O. K. in time for Superior. I hope so."

Tucker's dark features reflected doubt and what might have been disapproval. Then, with an abrupt motion, he jammed both hands into the pockets of his jacket, as though he had come to a decision.

"Look, Elliott," he said, "I'd like to get one thing straight. I'm not pretending I like you or the things

you've done. But since you won't be playing any more I want it clear that I've never accused anyone of choking. Even if I thought so — which I didn't — I'd never say it. That was none of my doing yesterday outside Harlow's."

Keith felt the blood rising in his cheeks. He understood now why Tucker had been so insistent on accompanying him back to the dormitory. The captain had wanted to get this off his chest — part apology, part rebuke. He found it difficult to frame an answer.

"O. K.," he said. "I guess I couldn't blame your cousin if she thought that anyway."

"I tore into her for saying it. She's a hot-tempered kid."

"You're telling me!" Keith spoke with such feeling that Tucker could not fight back the smile.

"You made her awful mad. But she's got a mind of her own and she doesn't get her opinions from me. Whatever she's said to you she thought up all by herself. That's straight."

"I can't remember seeing her when she wasn't sore as a goat about something, and always at me," Keith growled. "Does she have any other moods?"

The severe lines on Tucker's face vanished in a spontaneous laugh. "Actually, Cathie's a swell girl, for all her temper. You might even like her if you knew her better."

"Ha!" Keith's doubts were summed up in a snort. "I'd rather not try. She might kick my crutches out from under me."

"Up to you." Tucker's mirth was gone. "Well, take it easy."

As he turned to go, Keith said: "Thanks again. I'm sorry, honestly, about the way things worked out." A note of defiance crept into his voice. "I'm not through yet; I'll be there for Superior."

The chilled look came back to Tucker's eyes. "I doubt it, Elliott."

He did not add that he hoped not, but there was no doubt in Keith's mind that that was what he meant.

12

Calvert Plays Out the Schedule

THE nurse at the infirmary desk looked at Keith dubiously and then at the crutches.

"It's customary to have the doctor's approval," she said. "Are you sure you don't need them any more?"

"Positive." Keith grinned. "You can call Dr. Feeney at the gym. I ran all the way over here the minute he said it was all right to turn them in."

That was a slight exaggeration; he hadn't done any running. He laid the crutches on the desk and went out. He still favored the ankle a little, but after ten days on crutches any movement now seemed like floating.

Even Tim Robertson had grown rather tired of stumbling over the crutches in odd places.

"If you have to wreck something, next time make it an arm," he grouched after he had stubbed his toe for the fifth or sixth time.

"I'm sorry, Tim," Keith said plaintively, "but I have to leave them some place. Can't put them in my pocket when I'm not using them."

Actually, he liked to hear Tim gripe in that fashion. He had been filled to the ears with expressions of sympathy, not all of which had seemed genuine. Friends

like Leo Nyland had been sincere, but he was sure that Mel Stine and Herb Hawes had been only polite. And Glenn Nixon, whom he had encountered once as he was swinging himself along clumsily to see the doctor, hadn't meant a word of it, he knew.

"Heard about your accident, Elliott," the athletic director said stiffly. "Too bad. Sorry." He hurried on past.

"I doubt it, Glenn," Keith said softly. He could hardly blame Nixon for any lack of good will. In fact, during this period of restricted activity, he had come to realize that a large number of persons had no reason to regard him with affection.

The discovery had appalled him. Not that he had ever sought popular acclaim. But he had always thought of himself as living on amicable terms with the campus, without making any pointed effort to do so.

"Feels O. K. with your full weight on it, Elliott?" Dr. Feeney had asked that morning. "All right, consider yourself discharged."

"Can I play basketball?" Keith asked eagerly.

"Not today, son. Give yourself another two or three days before you try making quick stops or sharp turns on that foot. Just to make sure you do, I won't officially release you from the doctor's list before Monday."

Monday — that was late, but not too late if he was to meet Superior and Whitey Scales. Superior — undefeated, all-conquering Superior! Sequoia was already an unhappy memory. The Pack had gone down to the Foresters' gym the previous Saturday and lost by 20 points in a dull, drab game. His bad leg propped on a chair in front of him, Keith had listened to the broad-

cast of the contest with growing unhappiness. It sounded awful, and from what Charlie Trimble had to say about it next day, it had been awful.

Keith had hoped Dr. Feeney would turn him loose at once, so that he might play against Central in the Pack's last home game of the year three days hence. His disappointment was only momentary. They wouldn't need him to beat the dilapidated Engineers. It was Superior and Whitey Scales that counted, even though the Tigers had already sewed up the Conference championship. A Calvert victory there would be some compensation for the shattered early season hopes — a climax on a rising note.

If I could have a hand in that, Keith thought, I'd feel square with the world. And if Scales gets 30 points off me, I'll eat those crutches.

He wasted no time reporting to Walt Dewey's office.

"Doc Feeney let me off the hook today," he told the coach. "I can come back to practice Monday."

"Oh!" Dewey looked noncommittal for an instant. "Well, fine. See you Monday, then."

The coach showed no visible pleasure at the prospect, and Keith's newly generated enthusiasm quickly cooled. The coach had called it a deal — he would get the chance against Scales — but he sensed that Dewey would have been happy enough if his ankle had sidelined him for another week.

No one is really glad to see me come back, he thought bitterly. He knew now whose fault that was. But he was coming back just the same.

"Are you sitting on the bench tonight?" Tim Robertson asked him on the morning of the Central game.

"No, I'm still just one of the cash customers. I won't know for certain until Monday whether I can play."

He said it lightly, and reflected that it was technically true, since Doc Feeney was not going to release him officially until Monday. He did not want to force himself on his teammates by sitting among them.

"We can go together then," Tim said. "Meet you here at seven thirty."

There were plenty of empty seats in the pavilion when they arrived, and Robertson clucked in disdain.

"Same old story — everyone demands a winner. You'd think —" He broke off and clutched Keith's arm. "For the love of mud! Do you see what I see?"

He pointed across the gym to one of the entrances. Keith looked and his jaw dropped.

"I don't believe it!" he gasped.

But it was real. Leo Nyland had entered with a girl and was escorting her to a seat behind the visitors' bench. Even at a distance, Keith could not mistake Catherine Stone.

He and Tim gazed at each other and then, as though by signal, bent over to choke back their astonished laughter.

"The Lion Man!" Tim gurgled. "With a lion tamer!"

It was apparent early that Central had not improved since its earlier meeting with Calvert and that the Pack would take this one without trouble. That enabled Keith and Tim to spend as much time in fascinated contemplation of Nyland and his companion as they did in watching the action on the court.

"Oh, oh!" Tim exclaimed. "Now he's buying her

peanuts."

"That's bad," Keith said sorrowfully. How could Leo, his friend, consort with the enemy so happily!

Calvert won by 30 points, with Tom Rourke and Billy Wilson roaring through the Engineers by themselves in the final quarter. Keith felt a faint pang as he and Tim rose at the final gun. He had seen his last game as a student in these familiar surroundings.

They walked slowly out into the crisp night air and Nyland's voice suddenly sounded in his ears.

"Hey, Keith, come over here."

He whirled in dismay. The fat-faced traitor was standing at one side of the exit and Catherine Stone was with him, two spots of color on her cheeks.

Keith glanced swiftly at Tim, who inclined his head gravely toward Nyland. There was no way to ignore the invitation.

"You all know each other," Leo said, with what struck Keith as idiotic cheerfulness. "How'd you like the game? Pretty good, eh?"

Is the guy loony? Keith thought. Has he called me over to ask that?

"Hello." Catherine Stone smiled hesitantly. "I'm glad your leg is better, Keith. Jack was saying he hoped you'd be able to play next week."

"Thank you." Keith was astounded. So Jack hoped he'd play! He could hardly credit his hearing.

He caught a look on Nyland's face and swallowed.

"Thank you," he repeated, staring down at his hands for a moment as though there were something very much wrong with the fingers. Then he looked up at the girl. "I'm hoping to get another shot at Whitey

Scales. He gave me a bad time last month."

Catherine Stone said, "But he couldn't be that lucky again."

"Come on, Cathie," Nyland said briskly. "Let's go eat. So long, fellows."

"Now what was that all about?" Tim Robertson asked in bewilderment.

Keith watched Leo's broad shoulders disappear in the darkness. "I don't know exactly," he said softly, "but I think I owe the Lion Man an apology. He is not as dumb as he looks."

Leo looked sheepish when Keith finally ran him down the next day.

"I got to know her a week or so ago," he said, flushing. "The soph girls had a dance and I drifted in. She's a very good dancer," he added.

"I'm sure she is," Keith said soothingly. "Never mind that. You set up that meeting last night outside the pavilion and you knew what she was going to say. I think you made her say it. Now tell me how and why, before I beat it out of you."

"Ha!" Nyland indicated how much Keith's threat moved him. "Well, the only interest we had in common, it developed, was you, you big lout. But our opinions differed, so we reached a compromise, that's all. I convinced her you weren't quite the terrible, loud-mouthed, rock-headed clown she thought you were, and she convinced me you weren't the brilliant, talented athlete and leader of men I thought you were."

He spoke jocularly, but Keith knew he must have argued his case long and earnestly with the girl.

"Did she say her cousin Jack would just as soon I

stayed home, Leo?" he asked quietly, and Nyland frowned as though trying to remember.

"Gosh, I can't recall all the details, Keith," he said innocently. "We talked an awful lot."

"You're a rotten actor," Keith said. "I probably wouldn't enjoy hearing the details, anyway. But thanks for backing me up."

"I've been doing it for three years, haven't I?" Nyland growled to cover his embarrassment. "Who do you think was making the tackles on your side after they ran over you? Little Leo, that's who."

"That's a lie and you know it," Keith said affectionately. "So long, chum."

He had gone only a few strides when Nyland called after him.

"Just one thing, Keith. You'd better be good Saturday or —" He made a slitting motion across his throat.

Keith nodded. He wondered what Leo had really said to convince Catherine Stone he was a human being.

Yes, he thought, I'd better be good.

Someone had pasted a clipping on the inside of the door to the visitors' dressing room in the Superior field house. In groups of two and three, the Calvert players crowded around to read it, then turned away without comment. All of them had read it before — in the *Woodland Mail* that morning under Charlie Trimble's by-line.

"Calvert's Wolf Pack ends its season tonight at Superior in a game without meaning for either team. The undefeated Tigers are already assured of the Conference title, and since the fading Pack has not won from

Superior in six years, no one expects a Calvert victory. It is strictly a 'Who Cares?' game, to be played because the schedule requires it."

The words "Who Cares?" had been heavily underscored. Keith thought that Walt Dewey would hardly resort to such a hackneyed maneuver as to post such a clipping. He suspected one of the junior managers, who perhaps felt more keenly about the game than the players.

What Trimble had written struck Keith as perfectly true. The Pack had appeared quite unconcerned all week, and the indifference extended to his own return. His reappearance at practice had evoked only polite inquiries about the state of his ankle, although Tom Rourke did greet him heartily.

"Don't know if you can do this bunch any good," he whispered. "But it's a cinch you can't do 'em any harm."

Dewey made no attempt to drive the team in practice. They might have been preparing for a scrimmage with the freshmen from the relaxed manner in which they drilled. Even Jack Tucker seemed to have loosened up.

But now they were dressed and unbeaten Superior waited for them. Dewey looked around the group.

"This is the last one, fellows," he said. "Go out and enjoy yourselves."

Keith did not join in the ripple of laughter. For a moment he experienced a resurgence of his old scorn, but it passed quickly. If the Pack found some amusement in the prospect of taking another lacing, that was no longer any of his business. He had business principally with Whitey Scales.

Meaningless though the game might be in the league standings, the Superior field house was full. The Tiger rooters had come to acclaim their champions and see them remain unbeaten. Once again the roar from the packed rows of hostile rooters rang in the Pack's ears, but Keith could see no signs of the familiar tightening of nerves among his mates. This was the "Who Cares?" game, and there was no pressure on them.

The noise climbed to deafening proportions as the referees at last signaled the two centers to the mid-court circle. Keith flexed his shoulders, shook hands with the cold-eyed Scales and set himself as Jack Tucker stepped into the center circle. He was surprised to find himself so inwardly calm, so devoid of inner tension.

Suddenly it dawned on Keith — this was as it should be. No fear.

Then the ball went up. Superior scored quickly as Browning, the Tigers' other forward, flipped one from outside the keyhole. Just like that! Hawes brought the ball in, over to Keith. Tucker darted out to meet his pass beyond the foul line and made a beautiful turning push shot to tie it at once.

Scales led the Tiger rush, driving for the corner, and Keith played him a step looser than he had before. Whitey could have the shots from outside if he wanted them, but Scales was not going to fake him into knots and go around him. Not tonight!

Scales faked a shot, faked a whip pass into the lane, then cast off, a high arching push. Keith wheeled for the rebound. The ball spun in, spun out, and took a sharp drop off the rim right into Keith's hands.

That's one he didn't get, he thought grimly as he

cleared the ball cross-court to Hawes. The Pack were in no hurry. They worked carefully and easily outside the Tiger defense, trying to set up a good one. Then Minetti, taking advantage of a screen play set by Tucker at the foul line, cut across for a jump shot. The Superior guard behind Jack switched quickly to cover Fran, but Minetti, forced to twist in mid-air, took the shot anyway.

It was a no-percentage play; closely guarded as he was, Minetti should have passed off. But the ball went in anyway, and the Tiger guard gave Fran a look of disgust. The Pack bench yapped in delight.

The Tiger center swung loose on a hook shot that was wide and Scales got one futile slap at it before Keith hauled it down and into his midriff. Whitey made a fast clutch, trying to steal it out of his grasp, but Keith moved just in time and Scales's hand struck his wrist. The referee called a foul.

"Put it away, Keith," Tom Rourke called from the bench through cupped hands. He did.

"That's one point I'm ahead of him," he chortled to himself.

It was two more a moment later, for Hawes picked off a Superior pass near the side line. Keith, hovering by Scales on the opposite side, was perfectly placed to break in motion for the Superior basket.

Herb flung the leading pass across to him and the two of them raced down the floor against the lone Tiger guard. He flipped to Hawes and Hawes snapped it back to him 10 feet out. Keith went up with the ball and laid it perfectly over the edge of the rim just as the guard cracked him. When he sank the free throw

awarded him for that, Calvert was out in front, 8-2, and Stine yelled, "Atta way, Keith boy."

The Tigers seemed singularly unworried as they brought the ball across the center line, and this time they scored, the center slapping in a follow shot over Keith and Jack Tucker after Browning's attempt from the key had bounced off.

Then Scales popped one from the corner over Keith's upraised hands and the Superior rooters began to scream, anticipating the start of the runaway. It did not materialize, though, for Hawes set himself and rang one from 30 feet away, and then Tucker drove the length of the court in a brilliantly staggered dribble for a lay-in.

It went that way all through the first half, with the Pack ignoring most of the principles of sound basketball and getting away with it. They were taking as many bad shots as good ones, but the ball kept going through the netting just the same and Superior, playing good ball itself, could never quite overtake them.

Keith was aware that Scales was making points. But Whitey wasn't sinking everything he threw at the bucket, as he had before, nor was he setting up his mates for easy shots. The magic touch which had demoralized Calvert once was strangely missing.

The realization that they were not being blasted off the court seemed to come to the Pack slowly.

Trailing by four points late in the half, Superior called time out.

"You know," Fran Minetti said doubtfully, as though fearful of being contradicted, "we could beat these guys."

"Sure, all we have to do is hang in there," Stine said, glancing up at the scoreboard. "We've got 4 points on 'em now."

Hawes whacked a palm on the floor. "Anyway, we're giving 'em an argument this time," he said with obvious satisfaction. Keith could recognize the old Calvert attitude there. Herb wasn't really convinced the Superior giants could be trimmed down; he was willing to settle for a respectable showing in defeat.

I suppose that's an improvement, Keith thought. He checked his impulse to tell them that they could beat Superior tonight if they didn't beat themselves. You couldn't do it with a hammer, Walt Dewey had said, and he was right. The assurance had to come from within.

The Tigers cut it to 2 points, 35-33, at the half, and they were cheered off the court in a manner which showed plainly the rooters expected them to come back and mop the floor with the Pack.

"Having a lot of fun, aren't you?" Walt Dewey asked with a smile when the dressing-room door had closed on them.

"Hey, they're not so tough, Coach," Minetti piped. "Darned if I see how they went unbeaten all season."

"Their season isn't over yet," Tucker joined in grimly. "How I'd love to knock off these guys in my last game — our last game," he added fervently, his gaze taking in the seniors.

Dewey said: "Well, why don't you? But don't look for any help from me. You're doing fine so far; I couldn't think of a single thing to tell you that would be an improvement. Except get off your feet now and

relax."

Keith lay back on a bench. He felt he understood what Dewey was trying to do. The coach didn't want the Pack to set any great store by winning this game; he wanted to keep them loose and unconcerned. It was the "Who Cares?" game for Calvert, that was the idea. But it might not be that for Superior, proud of its undefeated record and trying to maintain it.

That would be something, Keith thought, if we could get the Tigers pressing against us. For all Walt Dewey's air of indifference as to the outcome, he knew the coach desperately wanted this game. It might remove the spell of self-doubt that had enveloped Calvert basketball teams down through the years.

Then it was time to go out again, and he could tell by the way the Tigers slapped each other on the back in encouragement that they had heard some sort of fight talk during the intermission.

"If they tie it up right away," Keith told himself, "they might roll."

They didn't roll, though they had the chance. Scales stole the tip and came driving down the middle and Keith, moving with him, fouled him as Whitey went up for the shot. It gave Scales two free throws and the tie was in his hands. But he missed them both, wincing openly as the second one rolled around the hoop and fell off. Tucker cleared the ball off the boards and Stine, wasting no time trying to set it up, cast off with a one-hand fallaway that was good.

"Come on, come on," Scales barked impatiently at the guard who had failed to stop Mel's shot. It was the first time Keith could remember hearing him speak

during a game. But all the Tigers were talking soon enough — to each other and to the officials. They wanted this game, no doubt of that, and Keith sensed that they were beginning to press as Calvert clung tenaciously to a lead that was sometimes only 2 points, sometimes as much as 6, but always a lead.

The baskets were coming harder on both sides as the third quarter passed into the fourth. Keith had lost track of his personal scoring duel with Scales. He knew Whitey was sinking some, that Browning was hitting, and occasionally the big center. But each time Superior scored, it seemed that Tucker or Stine or someone — twice it was he himself on driving lay-ins — retaliated for the Pack.

The noise from the rooters took on an insistent pleading note as the scoreboard flashed 55-52, 59-54, 62-60, then 65-61, Calvert always in front. Scales complained bitterly to the referee that Keith had fouled him on a missed shot, but the official shook his head.

Whitey's beginning to tie up, Keith thought, panting. He was dead tired, for Walt Dewey had not made a single substitution. This was the seniors' last stand; evidently Dewey was going to let them play it right up to the hilt.

It couldn't last. Herb Hawes committed his fifth personal foul and as Browning prepared to shoot two for the Tigers, the scorer's horn sounded and Hawes went off, too exhausted, too dejected, even to raise his head when Jack Tucker raced over to shake his hand.

Tom Rourke came on, eager as a colt, determination written on his freckled face.

"Let's pick 'em, they're nothing!" he snarled.

But Browning sank both, and it was 65-63. The pavilion rocked with sound as Keith retrieved the ball and glanced up at the clock before tossing it in to Rourke. Nearly three minutes left. Too long to try to stall. But they would have to play it carefully, make the Tigers come to them, set up the good one.

Superior came out in a full-court man-for-man pressing defense, and Keith had to hustle, after taking Rourke's hasty return pass, to dribble across the center line in time as Scales hounded him. He got the ball away to Tucker, and Jack came out to the center line, trying to draw Superior away from the basket.

But it could not go on forever under the Tigers' desperate pressure. They finally forced the jump ball as Scales and Browning tied up Fran Minetti in the corner, and on the tip Browning batted it to a guard.

The roar welled up from thousands of throats as Scales took the pass and dribbled deliberately down the side line. Once again he was the calm, assured Whitey. As Keith forced his aching legs to carry him back toward his own goal, he knew the Tigers were going to score. He could feel it.

It was Browning who did it, on a two-hand overhead set shot from 30 feet out, one that he should never have made. Tom Rourke wasn't within 5 feet of the Tiger when he let fly, and there was no reason he should have been. As the ball dropped through the netting, Keith's shoulders sagged, and for an instant he could have wept in frustration. He turned to see Tucker signal for the time out. The Superior players were hammering on the grinning Browning like crazy men.

The Pack went to the floor, gasping, and there was

misery in Jack Tucker's dark eyes. For once Keith felt a deep sympathy for the captain. This game was a symbol to him, the answer to the charge that his team was a fainthearted one. He had held that answer in his hands, and now he could see it slipping away.

"That lucky stiff, Browning!" Rourke's hoarse voice broke the silence in the semicircle of five panting players. "He wouldn't make that shot again in twenty years!"

"Of course not, Tom," Tucker said. "No one's blaming you."

The sophomore stared at Jack and then suddenly he seemed to swell with anger.

"That's mighty big of you, I must say," he rasped. "Blame me for what? We haven't lost the game yet — there's eighty seconds left. I don't know about the rest of you, but I figure on winning it in those eighty seconds! There's a first time for everything — even for you guys beating Superior."

Keith was too startled to do anything but stare at Rourke's face. There was no mistaking the meaning of those words. Tom was telling them all that no one was going to call next year's Wolf Pack a choke outfit.

Tucker's eyes flashed, but what he might have said at the moment was lost in the clamor of sound that erupted as the referees signaled the time out was over.

They got up painfully, all except Rourke, who jumped to his feet and glared defiantly around at the others. Suddenly Tucker extended his right hand.

"Come on, let's all shake on this one," he said softly.

There was a split-second surprised hesitation, then

four hands clamped around and on top of the captain's, and five heads were close together. Tucker looked directly at Keith across the tight little circle.

"You know, the kid may be right," he said. "There's always a first time."

It was almost an acknowledgment from Jack to him, Keith thought, with amazement. It was Tucker's way of conceding that he had been some help.

Tired though he was, Keith felt a rising joy of combat. The season was just now beginning for him. It would be a short one — eighty seconds all told — but he knew beyond a doubt that it would be a successful one.

He took the ball from the referee's hands and wondered why the official looked at him so oddly. Then he realized that he was grinning like an idiot. He stood out of bounds, under the Calvert basket, ball held high over his head. Scales, crowding the end line, pawed at him.

"Good-by, Whitey," he said conversationally, as the whistle blew and Rourke came darting swiftly toward him. He tossed the ball over Scales's reach to Tom who broke for mid-court.

It was fitting that Rourke should be the one to score, all things considered. The Pack moved the ball quickly and Keith again passed to Tom, whirled, and set himself to screen off Scales. Rourke came driving past, almost scraping Keith's jersey with his inside arm. Browning, guarding Rourke, had to go around to avoid running into either Keith or Scales, and Rourke, momentarily free, dropped his right shoulder and

flung the ball up through the hoop as easily as though it were practice.

The Tigers came down the court with the fury of desperation. It was Scales, of course, going into the corner and trying to feint Keith out of position with a fake shot. Keith moved a step to the inside and Scales started his drive for the basket along the end line.

Keith could not risk the foul by moving back to block the drive. So he crouched low and simply took the ball away from Whitey with a hooking motion of his right hand at the bottom of the dribble, sweeping it out before it had bounced an inch from the floor.

Scales, virtually continuing to dribble a ball he no longer controlled, could not check himself. Keith straightened as he spun round. On the far side line, a step beyond the Tiger guard, Jack Tucker had seen the steal and was already breaking for the Superior basket.

Keith made the throw, a long one, and Tucker took it on the run, bouncing it once as he cut to the inside. The guard was still behind him as he went up for the lay-in.

That finished it, for Superior had barely time to take one more futile shot before the gun went off and the blue-jerseyed Calvert subs boiled off the bench and tried joyously to beat the remaining breath out of Tucker.

It took quite a while for the dressing-room hysteria to wear off. Everyone seemed to be talking at once, with the exception of Walt Dewey, who went around with a smile, shaking hands with every man on the team.

Eventually, though, things quieted down and Dewey stood up on a bench in the center of the room and said, "This is a good team, and I'm proud to be the coach of it."

There was silence for a moment and then Tucker said innocently: "Were you worried, Walt? Why, you should have known we just had to beat Superior, no matter what had happened in the past. There isn't any past. This is a team that has found its future."

He looked at Keith and held out his hand again — and Keith's heart swelled.

